

FOOD POLICY

**The Responsibility of the
United States in the
Life and Death Choices**



**Edited with an Introduction by
Peter G. Brown and Henry Shue**

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Preface

We began this study in the summer of 1974, when food shortages abroad had acquired an unusual prominence in U.S. foreign policy. Prospects for the autumn harvest of that year were uncertain. Would the world be moving into the winter of 1974-75 with substantial grain shortages? This uncertainty and the unexpected developments in the grain markets of the previous 2 years had produced a situation of mild hysteria. *Ad hominem* attacks were being made on the Secretary of Agriculture. Public officials, clerical leaders, and strident voices from the right and the left were advancing proposals for protecting or changing the life-style of Americans. Some observers stressed the need for very substantial increases in foreign assistance. Others argued that assistance in fact undercut the welfare of those for whom it was intended or their descendants, and thus was irresponsible.

The furor has subsided with 3 years of better harvests in some regions. But, unfortunately, the problems of food shortages and malnutrition are not confined to the years when public attention focuses on them. Malnutrition of millions of people—indeed, hundreds of millions—occurs year in and year out. It is very likely to become worse in the future. What should we, the agriculturally affluent, do? What is fair in the distribution of this vital resource, food?

This book is designed to serve as a foundation for a reflective appraisal of these questions. Like all public policy issues the problem of chronic malnutrition, and occasional starvation, is a complex combination of factual, institutional, and moral elements. The formulation of policy necessarily involves a careful consideration of all these elements. Yet, despite enormous expenditures on research, we seldom if ever find ourselves in a position to consider these factors simultaneously. Philosophers and others trained or experienced in thinking analytically about moral issues often do not concern themselves with broad questions of public policy. When they do, they frequently do not have the

appropriate factual knowledge or a realistic appraisal of the institutional constraints on policy formulation and implementation. On the other hand, those well versed in the factual and institutional sides of policy problems often give little analytic attention to moral and conceptual issues.

As is unfortunately the case with many fundamental decisions about public policy, additional facts are themselves indeterminate. In the case of a U.S. policy with regard to world hunger, one great need is for a careful reexamination of the concepts and purposes in terms of which we structure the problem. Such a reexamination, with an eye to the factual situation and institutional constraints, is the purpose of this book.

In order that the reexamination should be untrammelled, no attempt has been made by the editors to enforce a single point of view upon the contributors, and the volume contains lively and, we believe, fruitful debates. Naturally the author of each essay speaks only for himself or herself and neither for the Academy for Contemporary Problems nor for his or her own institution or organization. Essays are included because they express well an important point of view and not necessarily because either editor agrees with them. Nor does the introduction speak for anyone except the editors.

Without the foresight of Ralph Widner, President of the Academy for Contemporary Problems, neither the essays which follow, all written specifically for this volume, nor the Academy's Working Group on Moral Issues in the Distribution of Food, which stimulated the essays, would have been possible. We appreciate his willingness to have the Academy undertake this unusual enterprise. We are also grateful for the continuous encouragement and good counsel of Michael F. Brewer, Fellow of the Academy, whose contributions to the book extend far beyond the essay bearing his name. Extraordinarily perceptive and thorough reviews of the manuscript were provided by Cheryl Christensen and Martin McLaughlin. And for sometimes long days of patient and skillful work and good humor under pressure, we are grateful to Colleen Pobanz and Virginia Smith. Only the editors of course bear responsibility for the final judgments made.

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H.S.

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Introduction

Peter G. Brown & Henry Shue

Chronic undernourishment of hundreds of millions of people whose lives are permeated by fatigue and without hope of fulfillment is first of all a problem of justice—at least as long as other hundreds of millions sit at bountiful tables. Assisting the hungry to get enough to eat involves, of course, a number of economic, political, and technical problems. Yet to guide these social and technical efforts, we must first decide who has a right to the relevant resources, and why. Recent public debate has not dealt directly with this issue. It often is assumed that the affluent have—for one reason or another—more of a right to food than the hungry.

This volume is concerned with the responsibility of the United States as an agriculturally affluent nation to assist in meeting the food needs of the world's poorer nations. Although not a new concern, it has assumed new importance as the alarming dimensions of the long-range problem have become known. Most projections of future world income, population growth, and patterns of food use suggest that the intensity of the problem is likely to increase. Hence appropriate U.S. policies must be formulated in the next few years.

In the following pages we introduce the four major issues discussed in this book: What is the nature of the problem? What responsibility, if any, does the United States have to respond to it? To what extent can we respond to it through our export policy? And what should be our policy for assisting increases in agricultural production by other countries? In discussing these questions here, we present glimpses into the chapters that make up the book, along with our own assessments of some of the major issues, assessments not all shared by all the authors of individual chapters.

THE PROBLEM: IS THERE A SHORTAGE OF FOOD?

Solutions to the problem of hunger can be evaluated only after the character of the problem is fully grasped. Several features of the “world food shortage” are

now widely understood. There is more than enough food for every human being in the world to be adequately fed. By some more equal distributions of food, including distributions which were still far from strictly equal, the amount of food now produced would provide an adequate diet for the current world population. Indeed, instead of an overall shortage of food, there are unjustifiable inequalities in the distribution of food among nations, within nations, and, where the allotment to each family is meager, within families.

The distribution of food consumption among nations, for example, is extraordinarily unequal. And how nations use the food they have varies considerably: more grain is consumed by the livestock of the Soviet Union and the United States than by the entire human population of less developed countries. Over the last decade, the increase in total grain consumption by Eastern Europe, where meat is becoming a more widely available food, was greater than the increase in total grain consumption by India, where population grows by a million a month. Generally, the difference in per capita food consumption between the wealthy nations and the poor nations is not only immense but expanding, with the poor nations failing even to keep up. The major reason for this is that increases in the income of the less poor almost always result in more demand for meat, the production of which often consumes large quantities of grain.

When poor people obtain more money, a large proportion of the additional money goes to purchase food. The distribution of food consumption generally reflects the distribution of wealth and income. The difference in diet between the United States and, say, Mali or Nepal is strongly influenced by the fact that in 1973 the GNP per capita of the United States was \$6,200, while the comparable amounts for Mali and Nepal were \$70 and \$90. These differences in income are, in Thomas Nagel's phrase, "radical inequalities," and they are at the root of the enormous differences in the quality of diet. As Charles Shuman puts it, "Hunger is an economic problem—there are no hungry people where there is money to buy food."

Most knowledgeable people, whatever their differences on other points, would agree with the preceding two general points concerning the total amount of food and the relationship between the distribution of food and the distribution of wealth and income. The two can be summed up together as follows: the basic cause of the "world food shortage" is the high degree of inequality in the distribution of wealth and income both among and within nations. The food needed now is being produced now, but the poor who need it most are not producing it themselves and do not have the money to buy it. In short, there is no "world food shortage," but, most tragically, there is a shortage of food in many places in the world.

Both increased production of food and improved distribution of wealth and income are necessary elements in any effective response to the future threat of hunger. An improved distribution of wealth and income by itself might merely lead to inflation in the price of food, which consequently would still remain beyond the reach of the poor. But increased production of food by itself does

nothing to prevent the increases in supply from going to the satisfaction of the preference for meat on the part of the not so poor rather than to the satisfaction of the need for grain on the part of the very poor.

Of the factors contributing to these regional shortages, population growth has until now tended to receive the most attention. But the present shortages of food in many parts of the world are a combination of rising population and rising incomes, though usually not in the same country. The malnutrition of millions is caused simultaneously by rising incomes for others—while the malnourished are left behind—and the high fertility of the malnourished.

Malnutrition is less an acute crisis than a chronic disease. Malnutrition is one aspect of a whole way of life—part of a package wrapped in the bonds of poverty. As several authors, including Haverberg, Martin, and Field and Wallerstein, point out, malnutrition reinforces, and is reinforced by, high rates of population growth, disease, lack of health care, inertia, and—above all—oppressive poverty.

What can be done? Former Secretary of State Kissinger in 1974 called for the elimination of malnutrition within a decade:

All governments should accept the removal of the scourge of hunger and malnutrition, which at present afflicts many millions of human beings, as the objective of the international community as a whole, and should accept the goal 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 stunned by malnutrition.

The opening chapter of this volume considers the feasibility of reaching such a goal in terms of global grain supplies, while a later chapter considers how individual malnutrition is to be defined and alleviated.

- How much more grain would have been required annually during the early 1970s to have *cut in half the number of malnourished individuals*? Lyle Schertz calculates that this would have meant increasing annual production—and consumption—by from 86 to 258 million metric tons. To have eliminated malnutrition would obviously have required far more. A decade from now, with a larger population and higher incomes in many parts of the world, reaching this same objective would require increasing production by many hundreds of millions of tons—if the demands of the affluent continue to be satisfied in accord with long-established dietary trends and distribution is determined in accord with supply and demand.
- How do we decide who is malnourished? Since, as noted by Linda Haverberg, nutritional standards are culturally relative, and even partly dependent on standards derived from what we mean by “health,” they must be carefully used. We can easily make the problem seem better, or worse, than it is by employing misleading standards. Yet careful nutritional planning can be invaluable in making existing food supplies and

monetary resources go further. Where there is simply not enough to go around, it is urged that resources be given to infant and preschool children and pregnant and lactating mothers, ignoring, if necessary, adult workers, so that irreversible harm may be prevented while it can be.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE UNITED STATES IN THE LIFE AND DEATH CHOICES: WHAT IS IT AND WHY?

Do those with the resources substantially to reduce—or even eliminate—malnutrition have an obligation to do so? Many of the chapters of this volume consider whether a negative answer to this question can be sustained: *none offers compelling reasons why transfers of income and wealth directed toward the malnourished should remain at their present low level.* Moreover, several argue convincingly that foreign aid be thought of, not as an act of charity, which is praiseworthy although optional, but as a moral obligation, which is required if one is to live a moral life.

Several chapters consider the nature and source of this obligation. Though coming at the question from different frameworks and premises, all offer essentially the same conclusion: that the United States has a substantial obligation to help meet food deficits in the poorer nations abroad by the most effective means possible. Present policy falls short of this objective.

- Starting from three simple premises—(1) that starvation is bad, (2) that if we can do something about a bad situation, we ought to, and (3) that we can do something about starvation—Peter Singer concludes that assisting those without enough food is morally required. Failure to contribute at least 10 percent of our incomes to the hungry is, on his view, morally wrong. Arguments that the hungry are undeserving, or are acting irresponsibly in continuing to increase their populations, are considered, but, in Singer's view, do not mitigate the immorality of continuing only present levels of assistance.
- In helping the radically impoverished, do we commit ourselves to being brought down to very near their level? Is such a view an attack on differences in wealth as such? Not in the least, according to Thomas Nagel. Radical inequalities should be eliminated, even if one does not favor equality of a more general sort. Since the world economy operates more and more like a fully integrated system, the legitimacy of that system must be judged by reference to the outcomes it generates. The radical inequalities underlying malnutrition, though often taken for granted, demonstrate the illegitimacy of the present world economic system.
- Should we reject the claims of the poor on the grounds that we own the resources in question and can do with them what we wish? Not if we

carefully examine various normative theories of property, argues Peter Brown. Even those views of property which minimize our obligations to others imply a responsibility to share certain proportions of wealth with nonowners. Other, and often more popular, theories suggest an even stronger obligation.

- Should we not give priority to family, friends, and home community over strangers in other nations? Our morality contains a place both for a principle of the equal moral standing of all persons and for special rights based on special relationships. In particular cases much depends, Samuel Gorovitz maintains, on whether what is at stake is the satisfaction of preferences or the provision of what is necessary for the exercise of human rights. While loyalty to one's own has morally laudable forms, self-deception can allow bigotry, selfishness, and insensitivity to masquerade as loyalty.
- Is it morally preferable, as advocates of "lifeboat ethics" maintain, to deny assistance, thus permitting a "small famine" now in order to avoid a possibly much larger one later? Not, according to Henry Shue, after a careful consideration of who is most likely to benefit from the denial of help and how reliable our predictions about the future will probably be. But it would also be irresponsible to concentrate on current needs to the neglect of investment for future generations. Most important, we are not forced to choose between today's hungry and tomorrow's hungry.
- Should we neglect the malnourished because assisting them will involve robbing other individuals of freedom of choice, as expressed through the free market? Only, says Victor Ferkiss (sharply disagreeing with chapters by Brown and Shuman), if we accept a hypothetical and unjustifiable idea of human freedom, and neglect to consider whether people's differential capabilities to participate in the free market are the result of free choice.

If, then, good arguments can be offered for increasing foreign assistance, what can be done about chronic malnutrition? Since there is no short-term prospect that the world will be able to get along without substantial American grain, how should we use it? And since the United States also has the technology and expertise to assist others to increase their own production, what forms of assistance are best for the recipients? A number of chapters address each of these topics.

EXPORTING TO THE DISADVANTAGED: DOES IT REALLY HELP?

What should be done about our grain exports to less developed countries? Some chapters advocate moving toward a free market in agricultural products.

- How much help are direct shipments of food outside market channels likely to be? Not much, argues Charles Shuman, since the primary

concern must be to avoid the tendency of governments to destroy the incentives for farmers to produce as much as they can. Attempts to handle food shortages by government interventions almost invariably make them worse. Moreover, such policies undercut the freedom to contract and to use one's own property, in addition to unnecessarily aggravating the problem of hunger by dampening production incentives. Interventionist policies are simultaneously morally hazardous and counterproductive.

- What about intervening in world markets to the extent of maintaining a reserve stock of grain for use when world production is low? Like the Biblical Joseph, shouldn't we put aside for the lean years? No, a monetary reserve would be better, in William Swank's view, for several reasons—above all, because the fact that a reserve system which actually held grain would make the supply situation worse by depressing production, both in the United States and overseas.

These chapters urge that free markets be relied on to increase agricultural production. Probably, on the supply side high returns on labor and capital will call forth strenuous production efforts. But will these be enough? How much grain would it take to meet human needs for food if most other related policies remained the same?

The currently accepted analysis of the world food situation by the U.S. Department of Agriculture concluded, as Schertz notes, that to eliminate malnutrition would require a production increase in grain of only 25 million tons, a comfortably small amount (less than 10 percent of the annual U.S. harvest). "But, says Schertz, "Such an estimate assumes that the 25 million tons would reach the malnourished and only the malnourished."

For anyone who would like to continue to rely on the existing markets for the purpose of getting food into the hands of the malnourished, Schertz has made a profoundly disturbing point: much of any increased production will go to those who want meat, not to those who need grain. In his assessment of this question, Schertz took seriously the most important implication of relying entirely on free market forces: that the poorest are always competing for grain with those with more money who prefer grain-fed meat. His conclusion, as already indicated, was that to have reduced the number of malnourished to 226 million people in the early 1970s would have required annually an additional 86 to 258 million tons of grain. And the amount of additional grain needed to eliminate malnutrition for the other 226 million would have been much higher still. Today, of course, the amounts required would already be even greater. Looking to the future, one can only conclude that the end of malnutrition is unforeseeable as long as grain must reach the poorest through normal market channels.

If we believe we are obligated to help end malnutrition, we appear to have no alternative to the building of effective extramarket mechanisms to influence *distribution*, as distinct from *production*. Effective extramarket channels

(Saylor, Martin) and intelligent interventions in the market (Ferkiss) must be used if our moral responsibility to help eliminate malnutrition is to be fulfilled. This is not to deny that agricultural producers, be they Indian peasants or American corporations, will produce only if they have incentives (Shuman), nor is it to deny that interventions in the market, such as the possible creation of grain reserves, should be designed so that production is not impaired (Swank).

But interventions which affect the way people express their wants and how much they are able and willing to pay can shift productive capabilities in ways which do not retard overall production. Two different types of alternatives are possible. First, we can alter the ability of the poor to buy grain, either by lowering its price (if this can in fact be done without discouraging production) or—probably better—by increasing their purchasing power through wider, better-paid employment and direct income transfers or increasing their resources for growing their own food. Until the unpredictable day when some breakthrough in agricultural technology makes possible a vast increase in world grain production, some action is needed to help the very poorest compete successfully in the world grain market with the less poor and the affluent, who can afford to pay more in order to consume grain indirectly in the form of meat.

Second, we can alter the consumption patterns of the more well-to-do. One mechanism for this purpose would be a luxury tax on grain-fattened meat, with revenues to be used in assisting the poorest to achieve a minimally adequate diet. These revenues could be spent on foodgrains so that overall production was not impaired. The moral appeal of this proposal is that those most able to eat well help those least able to eat at all. By merely making the satisfaction of a preference slightly more expensive for some, we could generate funds for reducing the desperation in the lives of others.

Other chapters do not address the free market, but look at various other policy objectives which might govern grain exports.

- Given the fairly complicated moral and economic considerations, we can at least minimize the sort of political uses of food aid which occurred during the Vietnam war, can't we? Yes, Thomas Saylor reports, Congress is already moving to establish a clear ranking of priorities among the various legitimate uses of food aid. No, argues Daniel Shaughnessy, all food aid is inherently political, and the new Congressional criteria designed to make much of it nonpolitical cannot work and will only make implementation inflexible. Moreover, Shaughnessy argues, some criteria-employed in the past have excluded those who need food the most.
- As Lawrence Witt observes, food aid is much more expensive now that the surpluses are gone, or at low levels. If we assume we have some fixed level of obligation, then changes in price will have profound impacts—since commercial grain sales help the U.S. balance of payments—on how much we do about world hunger in terms of amounts of food shipped. If

we desire a certain amount of foreign assistance, it is only rational to cut back on how much we provide if the price rises—much as we might eat less steak at \$10 a pound, even though we still liked it just as much.

- It is also not obvious, says Joseph Sneed, how to distribute satisfaction among various people and their various demands. If we can decide which desires are to be satisfied and which ignored, we will have simplified policy making considerably. Several alternatives concerning which demands to satisfy are discussed.

BETTER NUTRITION FOR THE POOR: WHAT PRIORITIES SHOULD THE UNITED STATES SET?

Every contributor to this volume would probably agree that it is urgent to improve the diets of the malnourished poor abroad, and each would probably also agree that it is urgent that appropriate steps be taken to slow the growth of population in the countries with severe malnutrition, not to mention elsewhere.

Many chapters allude to the "child survival hypothesis," which provides the theoretical basis for the hope that improving nutrition is one effective means toward controlling population, thereby obviating the need to choose between improving nutrition and controlling population. Michael Brewer's chapter analyzes the hypothesis in detail.

Accepting Brewer's judgment that the available evidence is inconclusive on the questions whether and in what circumstances the hypothesis is correct, we would argue as follows. First, in light of some of the basic and undisputed facts which we do know about demographic change, such as the compound rates at which population grows (for example, a growth rate of 3 percent, which is quite typical of less developed countries, means a doubling of the total every 24 years) and the importance of the percentage of the population which is entering the childbearing years (a percentage which may be very high indeed after a decade and a half if better nutrition does in fact decrease child mortality), a misplaced confidence in the effectiveness of indirect measures to slow population, which diverted resources from genuinely effective direct measures, could have catastrophic consequences which would become apparent only two or more decades after the fateful choices had been made. Even if the probability that the child survival hypothesis is not true, or is misleading, is low, policies based on it should not command undue resources. If it should be off the mark, we will be facing a world of far greater population and, probably, malnutrition of an even greater magnitude than today's. Hence, even if the child survival hypothesis should later turn out to have been correct all along, it need not have been irrational to have hedged one's bets until the evidence was more conclusive.

Second, as Brewer indicates, an improvement in nutrition which is to be adequate for a significant reduction in child mortality cannot occur in isolation

from improved sanitation, improved medical care, and perhaps even improved employment opportunities for parents—in other words, little short of general economic development. Such development cannot be either inexpensive or rapid. The programmatic complexity and the financial cost of fully implementing the strategy suggested by the child survival hypothesis must be directly faced.

Third, all that the correctness of the hypothesis entails is a decline in the birth rate, not a decline in the rate of population growth, which depends on the difference between the birth rate and the death rate. This distinction is crucial. Since it is precisely a decline in the rate of death of children which is supposed to lead to decline in the rate of birth of children, the two changes, as Brewer makes clear, *could* simply cancel each other out, leaving the rate of population growth as high as ever.

For these reasons it seems crucial that no increase in appropriations for improved nutrition should come at the expense of appropriations which can be effectively used for population control. The dilemma of this choice between nutrition programs and population programs is tragic and risky only if one begins by assuming that the resources devoted to these tasks should be at or near present levels. But from a number of very different sets of premises good reasons are given in each of several chapters (Singer, Nagel, Brown, Gorovitz, Shue) against treating the current distribution as justified or even acceptable.

Even if fertility rates decline sharply, world demand for grain will exceed the capacity of the United States and other exporters to meet it. In any case, less developed countries want to avoid dependence on external sources for their food. Increased production abroad by those who need the food is imperative. How should we facilitate it?

A long-standing problem in economics and in ethics is, How much should one generation forego in consumption in order to save or, more accurately, make investments for the future? Regarding policies to aid the malnourished to grow more of their own food, this problem has a special poignancy: since the numbers of malnourished in many less developed countries are likely to be larger as each year passes, should we not now be concentrating our resources on agricultural investments which will enable more people in succeeding decades to have adequate diets?

Edwin Martin and John Field and Mitchel Wallerstein challenge the economic and political assumptions of any policy of taking the investments for the future out of the food consumption of the present. Although they give a number of different specific arguments, their basic judgment, phrased as a point about the conceptual framework assumed by such a policy, is that in the case of food consumption by the malnourished, the sometimes useful theoretical distinction between “consumption” and “investment” often collapses. The potential productivity of those who are now malnourished is enormous. Accordingly, one of the best possible “investments” would be in the food “consumption” of the malnourished.