



WORLD HUNGER

TWELVE MYTHS

BY FRANCES MOORE LAPPÉ,

AUTHOR OF

DIET FOR A SMALL PLANET

AND JOSEPH COLLINS



World Hunger Twelve Myths

by

Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins

A Food First Book
Grove Press, Inc., New York

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First Evergreen Edition 1986

First Printing 1986

ISBN: 0-394-62297-9

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 86-45423

First Grove Press Edition 1986

First Printing 1986

ISBN: 0-394-55626-7

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 86-45423

Printed in the United States of America

A Food First Book/Published by GROVE PRESS, INC.
920 Broadway, New York NY 10010

5 4 3 2

Book design by Jana Janus and Norma Novy—typesetting by Diana Davis,
H. S. Dakin Company, San Francisco.

Acknowledgments

Our thanks first to Jeremy Sherman, Rachel Schurman, and Sarah Stewart. This book benefited immeasurably from your research and the tireless enthusiasm with which you left no stone unturned.

Both the research and writing of this book also benefited in innumerable ways, big and small, from expert criticisms and suggestions from colleagues around the world. To all, especially the most critical, we are indebted:

Keith Abercrombie, Will Alexander, Miguel Altieri, Marcos Arruda, David Barkin, Solon Barraclough, Medea Benjamin, Florida Botts, James Boyce, Chris Brazier, Fred Buttel, J. Baird Callicott, Robert Chambers, Barbara Chasin, Frederick Clairmonte, Stephen Commins, Belinda Coote, Phillips Cutright, Kenneth Dahlberg, Kevin Danaher, Alain de Janvry, Rene Dumont, Melanie DuPuis, Charles Elliott, Jonathan Fox, Andre Gunder Frank, Richard Franke, Mark Freudenberger, Dan Gallin, Susan George, Helena Gezeliuss, Terry Gips, Michael Glantz, Guy Gran, Edward Goldsmith, Kathleen Gough, Keith Griffin, Betsy Hartmann, Paul Hebinck, Steve Hellinger, Donald Hernandez, Anne-Marie Holenstein, Gerrit Huizer, Tony Jackson, George Johnson, Donald Inniss, Edmond Keller, George Kent, David Kinley, Michael Klare, Uwe Kracht, Mark Lapping, Luigi Laurenti, Richard Levins, Michael Lipton, John Moore, John Mellor, David Millwood,

James Morrell, William Murdoch, David Myhre, Jay O'Brien, Ingrid Palmer, David Pimentel, Pierre Pradervand, John Ratcliffe, Bill Rau, Peter Rosset, Vernon Ruttan, Wolfgang Sachs, John Scheuring, Claudio Schuftan, T. Paul Schultz, Amartya Sen, John Sewell, S.A. Shah, Douglas Shane, Peter Smith, Pierre Spitz, Robert Stauffer, Vasant Sukhatme, John Sutter, Philip Thompforde, Lloyd Timberlake, Dexter Tiranti, Nigel Wose, Robert Wasserstrom, Michael Watts, Ponna Wignaraja, Calvin Wilvert, Ben Wisner, William Wood, S.J.

Interns at Food First backed up our research assistants. Our thanks to: Susan Beaudry, Erin Bucklen, Judy Goddess, Elizabeth Linde, Horacio Maiorana, Irene Rice, Mark Taylor, Marianna Tubman, Jennifer Watson, Shauna Whidden, and Damon Wing.

Needless to say, we remain solely responsible for any remaining errors.

Our editor William Rodarmor and copyeditor Gaen Murphree deserve our special thanks for their expert and careful work.

To all our colleagues at Food First, we appreciate your support during the period of intense concentration necessary to complete this project. Extra thanks to Publications Director Ann Kelly for your support and advice at every stage, to Donna Kelley for finding research interns for the project, to Audee Kochiyama-Holman for editing the many footnotes, and to Keith Wood for your ever-ready help with the computers.

None of Food First's work, including this book, would be possible without the support of our members. We thank each of you. While a number of foundations and churches have contributed to our work over the years, three stand out for your loyal and vital assistance: the CS Fund, the Rubin Foundation, and the Presbyterian Hunger Program. Thank you.

Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins
San Francisco
June 10, 1986

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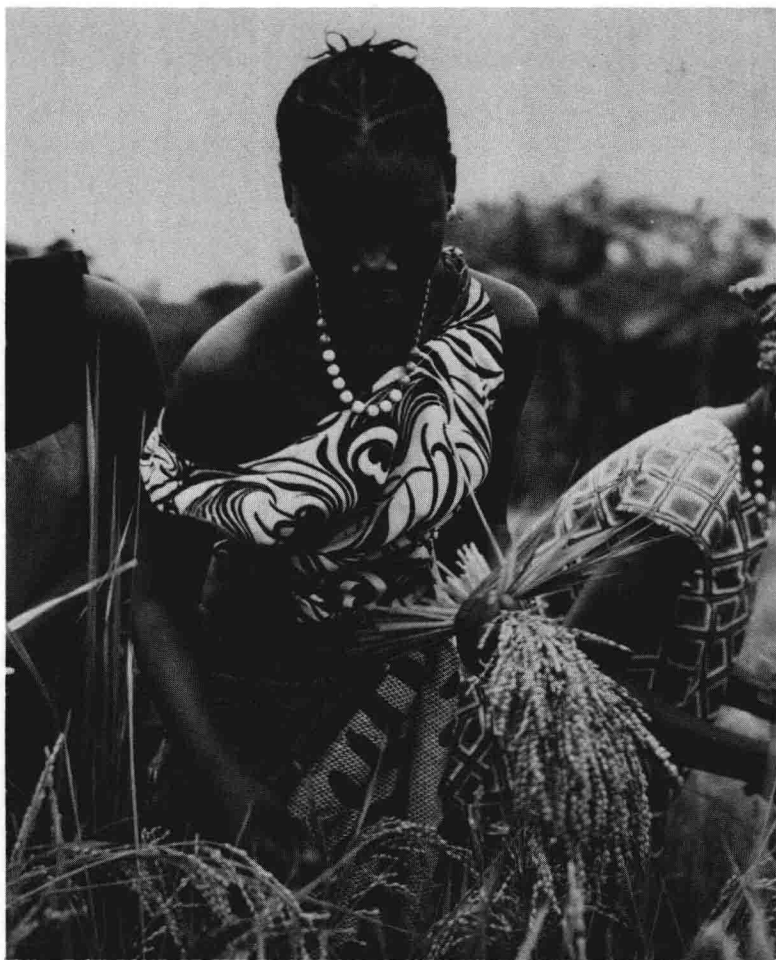
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Beyond Guilt And Fear

For over 15 years we have sought to understand why there is hunger in a world of plenty. For us, learning had to begin with unlearning. Cutting through the simplistic and scary cliches about hunger, we arrived at some surprising findings:

- No country in the world is a hopeless basket case. Even countries many people think of as impossibly overcrowded have the resources necessary for people to free themselves from hunger.
- Increasing a nation's food production may not help the hungry. Food production per person can increase while at the same time more people go hungry.
- Our government's foreign aid often hurts rather than helps the hungry. But in a multitude of other ways we can help.
- The poor in the third world are neither a burden on us nor a threat to our interests. Unlikely as it may seem, the interests of the vast majority of Americans have much in common with those of the hungry in the third world.

Our book explains these surprising findings and many more that have freed us from a response to hunger motivated by guilt and fear. But first we must ask the seemingly grade-school question, just what is hunger? Many people assume they know—they've felt it, they've read about it, they've been touched by images of hungry people on television. But the greatest obstacle to grasping the causes and solutions to world hunger is that few of us stop to ponder this elemental question.



World Bank photo

Women grow at least half of the world's food.

What Is Hunger?

Television images haunt us. Stunted, bony bodies. Long lines waiting for a meager bowl of gruel. This is famine—hunger in its acute form, the kind no one could miss.

But hunger comes in another form. It is the day-in-day-out hunger that over 700 million people suffer.¹ While chronic hunger

doesn't make the evening news, it takes more lives than famine. Every year this largely invisible hunger kills as many as 18 to 20 million people—more than twice the number who died each year during World War II.² This death toll is equivalent to the number killed instantly by a Hiroshima bomb every two days.³

Statistics like this are staggering. They shock and alarm. Several years ago, however, we began to doubt the usefulness of such numbers. Numbers can numb. They can distance us from what is actually very close to us.

So we asked ourselves, what really is hunger?

Is it the gnawing pain in the stomach when we miss a meal? The physical depletion of those suffering chronic undernutrition? The listless stare of a dying child in the television hunger appeal?

Yes, but it is more. And we became convinced that as long as we conceive of hunger only in physical measures, we will never truly understand it, certainly not its roots.

What, we asked ourselves, would it mean to think of hunger in terms of universal human emotions, feelings that all of us have experienced at some time in our lives?

We'll mention only four such emotions, to give you an idea of what we mean.

A friend of ours, Dr. Charles Clements, is a former Air Force pilot and Vietnam veteran who spent a year treating peasants in El Salvador. In *Witness to War*, he writes of a family he tried to help whose son and daughter had died of fever and diarrhea. "Both had been lost," he writes, "in the years when Camila and her husband had chosen to pay their mortgage, a sum equal to half the value of their crop, rather than keep the money to feed their children. Each year, the choice was always the same. If they paid, their children's lives were endangered. If they didn't, their land could be repossessed."⁴

Being hungry thus means anguish. The anguish of impossible choices. But it is more.

In Nicaragua four years ago, we met Amanda Espinoza, a poor campesina, who until then had never had enough to feed her family. She told us that she had endured six stillbirths and watched five of her children die before the age of one.

To Amanda, being hungry means watching people you love die. It is grief.

Throughout the world, the poor are made to blame themselves for their poverty. Walking into a home in the rural Philippines, the first words we heard were an apology for the poverty of the dwelling. Being hungry also means living in humiliation.

Anguish, grief, and humiliation are a part of what hunger means. But increasingly throughout the world, hunger has a fourth dimension.

In Guatemala in 1978, we met two poor highland peasants. With the help of World Neighbors, an Oklahoma City-based voluntary aid group, they were teaching their neighbors how to reduce erosion on the steep slopes onto which they had been pushed by wealthy landowners monopolizing the flat valley land. Two years later, the friend who had introduced us to the peasants visited our Institute for Food and Development Policy in San Francisco. We learned that one had been forced into hiding, the other had been killed. In the eyes of the wealthy their crime was teaching their neighbors better farming techniques. Guatemala's oligarchy feels threatened by any change that makes the poor less dependent on low-paying jobs on their plantations.

Increasingly, then, a fourth dimension of hunger is fear.

Anguish, grief, humiliation, and fear. What if we were to simply refuse to count the hungry and instead try to understand hunger in terms of such universal emotions? We discover that how we understand hunger determines what we think are its solutions.

If we think of hunger only as numbers—numbers of people with too few calories—the solution also appears to us in numbers—numbers of tons of food aid, or numbers of dollars in economic assistance. But once we begin to understand hunger as real people coping with the most painful of human emotions, we can perceive its roots. We need only ask, when have we experienced any of these emotions ourselves? Hasn't it been when we have felt out of control of our lives—powerless to protect ourselves and those we love?

Hunger has thus become for us the ultimate symbol of powerlessness.

The Causes of Powerlessness

Understanding that hunger tells us that a person has been robbed of the most basic power—the power to protect ourselves and those we love—is a first step. Peeling back the layers of misunderstanding, we must then ask, if powerlessness lies at the very root of hunger, what are its causes?

Certainly it is not scarcity. The world is awash with food, as chapter 1 will show. Neither are natural disasters to blame. Put most simply, the root cause of hunger isn't a scarcity of food or land; *it's a scarcity of democracy.*

Wait a minute! What does democracy have to do with hunger?

In our view—everything. To us, democracy is precisely the right concept because it carries within it the principle of accountability. Democratic structures are those in which people have a say in decisions that most affect their well-being. Leadership can be kept accountable to the needs of the majority. Antidemocratic structures

are those in which power is so tightly concentrated that the majority of people are left with no say at all. Leaders are accountable only to the powerful minority.

In the United States, we think of democracy as a strictly political concept, so it may seem contrived to apply it to the economic questions of land, food, jobs, and income. Political democracy helps us as citizens to protect certain rights—to reside where we will, to vote, to have our civil liberties upheld, and so on. Unlike in many societies, here such universal political citizenship is taken for granted.

But along with many other societies, we lack a concept of economic citizenship. To parallel our universal political rights, we have not yet established universal economic rights, such as the right to life-sustaining resources or the right to participate in economic decision making.

What we hope to show in this book is that as long as this fundamental concept of democracy—accountability to those most affected by decisions—is absent from economic life, people will continue to be made powerless. From the family, to the village, through the national level, to the level of international commerce and finance, we will witness the continued concentration of decision making over all aspects of economic life, including what it takes to grow and distribute that on which all life depends—food. Poverty and hunger will go on destroying the lives of millions each year and scarring the lives of hundreds of millions more.

Let us look briefly at how on each of the levels antidemocratic decision making robs people of power over their lives.

First, within the family, who controls food resources? Women are responsible for growing at least half the world's food. In most African societies, the primary farmers have long been women. The resources they have to grow staple foods largely determine their family's nutritional well-being. But many African women are losing authority over land use—the result of the privatization of land ownership and a focus on export crops that began under colonialism. Credit for growing cash crops has gone overwhelmingly to men, and “women's crops” have stagnated. Especially in Africa, this shift of power within the family helps explain growing hunger.⁵

Second, at the village level, who controls the land—and how many families have none at all?

In most countries, a consistent pattern emerges—fewer and fewer people control more and more farm and pasture land. With fewer families controlling an ever greater share of the land, more and more people have none at all. Since 1960, the number of landless in Central America has multiplied fourfold.⁶ By the mid-1970s, in at least 20 third world countries, 50 percent or more of the rural people were effectively landless, deprived of the most basic resource needed to feed their families.⁷

Third, at the national level, how are public resources allocated? Wherever people have been made hungry, power is in the hands of those unaccountable to their people. These antidemocratic governments answer only to elites, lavishing them with credit, subsidies, and other assistance. To protect the privileges of the wealthy minority, they increasingly funnel public resources toward the military. On average, third world governments devote less than 10 percent of their budgets to agriculture; in some poor countries the share is decreasing.⁸ But during the 1970s, expenditures on arms by third world governments leapt fourfold—in Africa, 13-fold.⁹ With increasing brutality, such governments fight any reform that would make control over food-producing resources more equitable.

There is yet a fourth level on which democracy is scarce—the international arena of commerce and finance.

A handful of corporations dominate world trade in those commodities that are the lifeblood of third world economies. Efforts by third world governments to bargain for higher commodity prices have repeatedly failed in the face of the preeminent power of the giant trading corporations and the government trade policies of the industrial countries.

Consumers in the industrial countries spend \$200 billion a year for agricultural products from the third world, but traders, processors, and marketers reap most of the profit. Of the 15 percent of the consumer's dollar retained by third world countries, only a fraction returns to the producers themselves.¹⁰ And the value of this 15 percent is shrinking: in 1986, the prices paid for third world raw commodities hit their lowest levels in history, relative to the prices of manufactured goods and services.¹¹

Heavily indebted to international aid agencies and private banks, third world nations are also at the mercy of policies decided upon in the capitals of the industrial nations, policies leading only to further impoverishment.

In attempting to capsule the antidemocratic roots of hunger, we have traveled a great distance—from the level of the family to that of international commerce and finance. Let us complete the circle by returning to the family.

As economic decisions are made by those unaccountable to the majority, insecurity deepens for millions of people. Economic pressures tear family bonds asunder as men are forced to leave home in search of work and joblessness leads to family violence and dissolution. More and more women shoulder family responsibilities alone; worldwide, perhaps as many as one-third of all households are now headed by women. On top of the weight of poverty, they confront barriers of discrimination against women. The breakdown of the traditional family structure does not bring liberation for them; it simply means greater hardship. Most of the hungry in the world are

women and the children they care for. Most of those who die from hunger every year are children.¹²

We have still peeled off only one layer in our effort to grasp the roots of hunger. We have identified the problem: the ever greater scarcity not of food or land but of democracy, democracy understood to include the life-and-death matter of economics. But we must dig deeper. We must ask why. Why have we allowed this process to happen at the cost of millions of needless deaths each year?

How We Think About Hunger

Especially in troubled times, people seek ways to make sense of the world. We grasp for organizing principles to help us interpret the endlessly confusing rush of world events. It's a natural, human process—perhaps as human as eating itself. But living effectively depends on how well our organizing principles reflect reality.

Unfortunately, the principles around which many of us have come to organize our thinking about world hunger block our grasp of real solutions. This entire book is structured around such organizing principles. We call them myths, not to suggest that the views embodied are totally false. Many have some validity. It is as organizing principles that they fail. Not only do they prevent us from seeing how we can help the hungry, they obfuscate our own legitimate interests as well. Some fail us because they describe but don't explain, some are so partial that they lead us down blind alleys, and some simply aren't true.

What we want to do is to probe the underlying assumptions people have about world hunger's causes and cures. For we've come to believe that *the very way people think about hunger is the greatest obstacle to ending it*.

After reading our book, we hope you will find that you no longer have to block out bad news, but can face hunger squarely because a more realistic framework of understanding—to be repeatedly tested against your own experience—enables you to make real choices, choices that can contribute to ending this spreading but needless human suffering.

Our book may shake your most dearly held beliefs or it may confirm your deepest intuitions and experiences. Most of all, we hope that it convinces you that until humanity has solved the most basic human problem—how to ensure that every one of us has food for life—we cannot consider ourselves fully human.

There's Simply Not Enough Food

MYTH: With food-producing resources in so much of the world stretched to the limit, there's simply not enough food to go around. Unfortunately, some people have to go hungry.

OUR RESPONSE: The world today produces enough grain alone to provide every human being on the planet with 3,600 calories a day.¹ That's enough to make most people fat! And this estimate does not even count the many other commonly eaten foods—vegetables, beans, nuts, root crops, fruits, grass-fed meats, and fish.²

Abundance, not scarcity, best describes the supply of food in the world today. Rarely has the world

seen such a glut of food looking for buyers.³ Increases in food production during the past 25 years have outstripped the world's unprecedented population growth by about 16 percent.⁴ Indeed, mountains of unsold grain on world markets have pushed prices downward over the past three decades.⁵

All well and good for the global picture, you might be thinking, but doesn't such a broad stroke tell us little? Aren't people starving because of food shortages where most hungry people live—in Africa, Asia, and Latin America?

Hunger in the face of ample food is all the more shocking in the third world. In every region except Africa, gains in food production since 1950 have kept ahead of population growth.⁶



World Bank photo by Ray Witlin

Abundance best describes the world's food supply.

During the 1970s, only 12 percent of the world's population lived in countries where food production per person was falling.⁷

One hypothetical question best highlights how misleading it is to think of food shortages in the third world as the root cause of hunger: how much of the food now available within third world countries would it take to make up for the total food lacking in the diets of each country's chronically hungry people?

According to the World Bank, the answer is but a tiny percentage.⁸ In India, home of over a third of the world's hungry people,⁹ the reallocation of a mere 5.6 percent of current food production would wipe out hunger, making an active life possible for everyone.¹⁰ For Indonesia, with the second greatest number of undernourished people in the world,¹¹ only 2 percent of the country's food supply would make the difference.¹² And in Africa, 7.8 percent of the food supply of Tanzania and 2.5 percent of that of both Senegal and Sudan could meet the needs of the hungry.¹³

This is, we underline, a hypothetical exercise. As the World Bank itself cautions, even though enough food exists, the poor are not able to purchase it.

Thus, even most "hungry countries" have enough food for all their people right now. This finding turns out to be true using official statistics even though experts warn us that newly modernizing societies invariably underestimate farm production—just as a century ago at least a third of the U.S. wheat crop went uncounted.¹⁴ Moreover, many nations can't realize their full food production potential because of the gross inefficiencies caused by inequitable ownership of resources. We will discuss this in chapters 4 and 6.

Finally, many of the countries in which hunger is rampant export much more in agricultural goods than they import. It is the industrial countries, not the third world countries, that import more than two-thirds of all food and farm commodities in world trade.¹⁵ Imports by the 30 lowest-income countries, on the other hand, account for only 6 percent of all international commerce in food and farm commodities.¹⁶

Looking more closely at some of the world's hunger-ravaged countries and regions confirms that scarcity is clearly not the cause of hunger.

India. India ranks near the top among third world agricultural exporters. While as many as 300 million Indians go hungry, the country exports everything from wheat to beef and government officials agonize over how to get rid of mounting "surpluses" of wheat and rice—24 million tons in 1985, more than double the entire world's annual food aid shipments in a typical year.¹⁷

Bangladesh. Beginning with its famine of the early 1970s, Bangladesh came to symbolize the frightening consequences of people overrunning food resources. Yet Bangladesh's official yearly rice output alone—which some experts say is seriously underreported¹⁸—could provide each person with more than a pound of grain per day, or 2,064 calories.¹⁹ Adding to that small amounts of vegetables, fruits, and legumes could prevent hunger for everyone. Yet the poorest third of the people in Bangladesh eat at most only 1,500 calories a day, dangerously below what is needed for a healthy life.²⁰