A Brief Understanding of Hunger and its Resolution

It is helpful to begin with our own attitudes about food. If we can appreciate the powerful personal context for food that we bring to any understanding of hunger we can avoid paternalistic or self-defeating solutions. In this, the generation of abundance, we often do not appreciate food for what it really is as we enjoy the enormous variety and preparations that are available to many of us. We have gone beyond complex gourmet preparations to have dozens of television shows depicting the fastest chefs or the most creative exotic concoctions – and not just in the U.S. One can see this as a celebration of abundance or as a circus of gluttony, yet a core understanding is often missing.

Food is one of the most primal ways to transmit culture and traditions (along with language and music) and thus holds a pivotal cross-generational importance for most of us. Even so, it is easy to forget that its relevance is even more profound: food is literally life. (Even the healthiest person cannot live more than about three weeks without food or about 3-4 days without water).

If food is indeed life then why do we really abuse, waste or discard so much of it? If we have enough, is that all that matters? I would say that our ideas and attitude about food impact others to the point of death. I would like to share some remarkable information on why that is so and what you can do about it.

Famine is a natural or man-made emergency that can make headlines but it only accounts for less than 10% of world hunger.

Understanding the intrinsic sacredness of food enables us to appreciate it more and to empathize with the suffering of not having it. An understanding begins with compassion or at least the desire to know why one in seven of us is starving.

The other 90% is chronic, persistent hunger and doesn't look like famine. Chronic hunger is not enough of the right kind of food over a long period of time. It is not always visible and it is almost silent.

Many people are surprised to learn that **hunger is not about enough food production**. Some of the hungriest people live in countries that produce more than enough food. India, for example, is the country with the largest number of hungry people and also has millions of tons of surplus food in government and private storage. It is not alone in this. Politics and money keep food from those that need it and demonstrate quite starkly that **markets often do not work for the poorest**.

Free trade and liberalization have helped to reduce food costs but do not make a difference to the 1 billion poorest who often lack access to markets and live on less than one dollar per day.

For the poor, at least some **local self-subsistence is critical**. To do that communities require a measure of organization and capacity building so that people participate fully. This creates opportunities for learning mutual self-sufficiency and opens further possibilities that range from better market negotiations and political representation to scale economies for transportation, fertilizer, renewable energy, etc.

World food production (per capita) has grown by 17-20% in the past 40 years But in 33 poor countries the average person still gets less than 2200 kcal day – some much less.

A strong and resilient community provides the fundamental foundation of sustainable development. Such a community tends to emphasize shared responsibility and participatory decision-making that involves women, elders, and youth. Once organized, the community is better able to build and maintain necessary physical infrastructure such as a community farm or a basic food storage and processing (i.e. cleaning or drying) facility. From the ground level social structures or market structures of such a community or groups of communities emerge local institutions that can range from micro-finance operations, to seed banks, to providers of technical assistance.

About 7 million children will die this year from various illnesses as a consequence of chronic hunger. That is 14 children each and every minute. Most are under 5 years old.

Sharing and reinforcing **training across communities improves sustainable resource management** in a region and can increase agricultural productivity by developing and sharing basic techniques such as drip irrigation and systems such as organic or Permaculture that have been demonstrated to better withstand weather shocks (drought & deluge), provide superior nutrition diversity, and are independent of external supplies of costly fertilizers and agro-chemicals.

A community can also reduce its future risks by **catalyzing similar action in surrounding areas**. Such affiliations not only reduce risks of catastrophic crop failure in a region but also permit more stable management of resources such as water, or community pasture and forests. Networks also facilitate local credit and savings structures as well as providing a united political voice that are both rare in poor rural areas.

The number of malnourished people has grown threefold in Africa since 1970.

Organized communities that have developed the capacity to manage themselves democratically, and actively include women, youth and elders, can often make other necessary advances that contribute to reduced hunger and improved well-being. These include primary health care (for example, water-borne disease from lack of sanitation is a major killer of the malnourished) and basic education and literacy. With enough food, basic health care and some education, communities can avoid many catastrophes.

Many **aid or charitable projects have made only a modest impact on hunger** because they have historically addressed only a single or few concrete issues and have a tendency to target the easy changes such as financing some infrastructure or providing a service, or even free seeds. They have rarely addressed the core issues of community empowerment that are fundamental in order to build the necessary frameworks for all sorts of sustainable development. Most aid projects are short-lived and seldom extend beyond 3 years. Efforts or projects that are primarily dependent on outside funds are inherently too paternalistic and are simply not sustainable. Money is, of course, necessary but it is not the primary need. There are far too many examples reflecting a naïve notion that throwing considerable amounts of money at a project or community will fix things.

This is certainly not comprehensive but I hope that having a basic outline of what appears to work will make your choices or efforts more successful in preventing and reducing hunger among the world's most vulnerable people. Of course, most folks are not prepared to go

and work directly on such issues, yet there are a number of **worthwhile organizations** that do. A few actually do so in a sane and cost-effective manner. You can. check some out and see if any of them appeal to you, then consider volunteering or supporting their efforts directly. While our governments and some of the multilateral agencies (I have worked for several) may not always make much of a difference on these issues, you and I can do so individually – see links below.

Perhaps **the most powerful effort we can make is also one of the simplest**. Start with ourselves and with those around us such as family or friends and set an example by simply being mindful of our own eating. I find it helpful to pause before eating to acknowledge gratitude for simply having enough and also to offer a simple wish for those that do not. When I forget to pause, some of my family and friends do it and serve as a helpful reminder to be aware and in the present. Such mindfulness enables us to understand that food gives life and is thus sacred and worthy of respect even when abundant. The pause and the moment of appreciation also seem to make the food taste even better somehow (except maybe for haggis that seems to be exempt from tasting good, unless of course you're a Scot or a Hun…just kidding).

If you are interested in taking further steps, on our Links page you will find some organizations that are working on the core issues. Each has its own approach, so it should be easy to contact one that aligns with your preferences. [Link to resources]

Thanks for making a difference,

Daniele Giovannucci

[1] Many leading industrial nations agreed to spend 1% of their GDP on development issues in poorer regions and only a handful have actually kept their promise (most are Scandinavian). Some have not only declined to honor the promise but actually choose to spend exponentially far more on military-industrial “donations” to other countries than on humanitarian aid.