

Eliminating Hunger: A Matter of Relationships¹

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The Slow Food movement envisions a world in which there is no hunger—everyone has enough good food, including those who grow food and those of future generations.

“Slow Food envisions a world in which all people can access and enjoy food that is good for them, good for those who grow it and good for the planet. Our approach is based on a concept of food that is defined by three interconnected principles: good, clean and fair.

- GOOD: quality, flavorsome and healthy food
- CLEAN: production that does not harm the environment
- FAIR: accessible prices for consumers and fair conditions and pay for producers.”ⁱ

“Good food” means healthful, nourishing food. “Clean food” means produced in ways that protects the soil, water, air, the environment—the things of nature future generations must rely on to produce their food. “Fair food” means ensuring that good food is accessible for everyone, not just those who can afford to pay market prices. Fair also means those who produce good food are able to make a decent living, not simply subsist on whatever markets determine they deserve.

This core philosophy of Slow Food is completely consistent with the philosophy of agricultural sustainability. Contrary to popular belief, sustainable agriculture is not defined by a set of farming methods, practices, or technologies designed to reduce the negative environmental, social, and economic impacts of industrial food production. *Sustainability is the ability to meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future.* A sustainable food system must meet the basic food needs of everyone today while leaving an equal or better system of food production for those of the future. Sustainable agriculture, like the Slow Food movement, envisions a world in which all people can afford access to food that is good for them, good for those who grow it, and good for the planet.

Elimination of hunger is the “first condition” of sustainability. Unfortunately, sustainably produced foods today are often unaffordable to the people who most need “good” food, particularly children in low-income families. As a result, the sustainable food movement, like the Slow Food movement, is being increasingly marginalized as “elitist” and out of touch with reality. Admittedly, the sustainability movement has put far more emphasis on the second requisite for sustainability than on the first—on protecting the natural environment while producing good food for those who can afford it. There is little indication that the sustainable food movement is actually committed to eliminating hunger. The urban agriculture movement is perhaps an exception, where some urban gardeners produce food to meet the needs of their own communities. Even in urban areas, however, much of the emphasis of the sustainable food movement is on producing food for upscale restaurants and high-end food retailers.

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How can we ask people who don't have enough food for their own children to make sacrifices to ensure enough food for future generations? How can we expect even middle-class Americans to take the sustainability movement seriously when it appears to be an elitist movement of an affluent liberal minority? The Slow Food vision of a world of "Good, Clean, Fair Food" seems an unrealistic fantasy for those who remain hungry in a world where "junk food" is plentiful but good food seems a luxury that few can afford.

Admittedly, the elimination of hunger is a *big* challenge. The prospect of hunger has plagued much of humanity throughout its existence. Times of hunger, even famine, were unavoidable and inevitable. There was simply not enough food to nourish everyone, everywhere, all of the time. However, hunger in the world today is avoidable or discretionary. There is plenty of food in the world to ensure enough food for everyone, as Amartya Sen, winner of the 1998 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science, documents extensively in his book *Development as Freedom*.ⁱⁱ Even when a given nation has a production shortfall, there are always means of importing enough food to meet the basic nutritional needs of all—if there is the political will to do so. In addition, the world's farmers have the capacity to work with nature to produce far more *good* food that is currently produced, given a reasonable economic opportunity to do so.

In today's market economies, hunger is a consequence of the inherently unequal ability or capacity of people to produce things that have market value. Many people simply are unable to earn enough money to buy enough nutritious food for themselves and their families. Market economies also tend to rely on *impersonal* government programs and large charitable organizations to address the failure of markets to meet the food needs of the poor. As Sen points out, there has never been a famine in a democracy because democratic governments have political incentive to respond to food *crises*. While effective in preventing famines or mass starvation, neither government programs nor charities have proven effective in eliminating chronic hunger, and may even perpetuate hunger as a lingering malady of society.

The fundamental problem is not a lack of human capacity to eliminate hunger but instead is simply our unwillingness to fundamentally change the way we relate to and care for each other. For example, about 13% of all U.S. households are classified as "food insecure," and nearly 17% or one-in-six of American children live in food insecure households, meaning they live with the ever-present prospect of hunger.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition, the foods most accessible and affordable to people with low incomes are high in calories and lacking in essential nutrients. Obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease represent a new kind of hunger—many people are overfed but undernourished. Tens of millions of people in the U.S. and billions around the world are hungry or malnourished today simply because the rest of us don't care enough to ensure that everyone has access to enough good food.

I am convinced hunger is a natural consequence of dysfunctional, *impersonal* human relationships. Economic relationships are inherently impersonal. Markets are simply a means of meeting our needs and wants without having to rely on *personal* relationships. With increased reliance on markets to meet our needs in increasingly complex societies, human relationships have become increasingly impersonal and dysfunctional. Markets respond to scarcity, not human necessity. Charity, while well intended, has never filled the gaps left by markets. Food banks in

the U.S. have become large, impersonal industrial food distributors and have only recently begun to turn away from “junk food” to offer healthier food choices.^{iv} Many people who need food assistance either deem themselves undeserving or are too proud to ask for help. In addition, times of greatest need are often times when people can least afford to give.

Past government food assistance programs also have failed because they have been impersonal and thus rule-driven and inherently bureaucratic. The taxpayers who have paid for food assistance have had no personal sense of connectedness or responsibility for the recipients. Those receiving food assistance have had no personal sense of appreciation or gratitude for those who have paid for the food. This has left state and federal food assistance programs vulnerable to gross inadequacy, economic inefficiency, fraud, and abuse. Hunger is a “market failure,” meaning we simply cannot rely on markets to ensure enough good food for all. To eliminate hunger, we must make government work, meaning food assistance programs must be fundamentally different from those of the past.

The global Food Sovereignty movement provides a conceptual framework for food assistance programs that could actually eliminate hunger. Food Sovereignty recognizes “The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”^v Food sovereignty rejects reliance on markets and advocates for “local control” of food choices, land use, and systems of food production and distribution.” Local commitment, local production, and local control create opportunities for restoring the sense of personal connectedness that was sacrificed to the market economy, when people quit growing food together and sharing whatever they grew with each other.

I have suggested the model of locally governed, cooperatively managed, “community food utilities.”^{vi} Public utilities are commonly used in cases of “natural monopolies,” including public utilities for electricity, water, and sewers. However, public utilities are appropriate in any case of market failure—as in the case of hunger, where markets cannot provide for this essential public need of everyone in a community. Public utilities insulate the provision of such services from the market economy to ensure that the basic needs of all are met. One important difference between my proposed community utility and other public utilities is that local farmers, processors, distributors, and food recipients would all be included on boards of directors. The utilities would be managed as “vertical cooperatives” to ensure sustainability of the entire local food system.

The nutritional needs of food recipients could be met by means that give priority to local food producers, paying them enough to ensure that their economic returns are sufficient to support sustainable production practices. Current government food assistance funds could be integrated into the food utility to cover most of their costs. Educational programs could help recipients learn to select and prepare raw and minimally processed nutritious food. Maximum nutrition at minimum costs. A community food utility also could provide a stable economic foundation for sustainable local food systems that eventually could be available to all in the community, regardless of income. A Community Food Utility could ensure Good, Clean, Fair food.

That being said, no particular organizational structure—public utility, cooperative, alliance, or network—will ensure the elimination of hunger. Some of us don’t have enough to eat because

the rest of us don't "care enough." The moral and ethical capital essential for "caring and sharing," which was built up over centuries of personal relationships, but has been depleted by impersonal market economics and government bureaucracies. We can begin restoring caring, sharing *personal* relationships through a commitment to eliminate hunger—beginning in our local communities. We can simply "care enough" to ensure Good, Clean, Fair food—for all.

End Notes

ⁱ Slow Food, "Our Philosophy," <https://www.slowfood.com/about-us/our-philosophy/> .

ⁱⁱ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, (New York, Anchor Books, Random House, 1999).

ⁱⁱⁱ Economic Research Service, USDA, Food Security Status of U.S. Households in 2016, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics/> .

^{iv} Anne Stych, "Food Banks Turn Away from Junk Food," <https://www.bizjournals.com/bizwomen/news/latest-news/2017/09/food-banks-turn-away-from-junk-food.html?page=all>

^v Nyeleni Forum on Food Sovereignty, "Declaration of Nyeleni," February 27, 2007, <http://nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290> .

^{vi} John Ikerd, 2016, "Enough good food for all: A proposal." *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 7(1), 3–6. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2016.071.001> .