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# World Hunger: Its Roots and Remedies

Frances Moore Lappé

## Overview

- What is the extent of world hunger?
- What is the conventional explanation for explaining and alleviating hunger and what are its shortcomings?
- What are the real causes and remedies of world hunger?

To the question 'Why hunger?' the prevailing answer has long been 'scarcity', and the solution has seemed equally clear: we end hunger by alleviating scarcity as we extend the West's proven economic model to hungry people. Yet, despite more than enough food in the world to feed us all well (UN FAO 2002) and world economic output multiplying almost fivefold per person over the last sixty years (De Long 1998, pp. 1–12), hunger still plagues humanity and is worsening in many parts of the world (UN FAO 2006, p. 6). In response to such failure, awareness is growing that scarcity is not the cause of hunger but a symptom of deeper causes. Hunger results from a set of beliefs governing human relationships that in turn generate artificial scarcity.

Historically, a range of belief systems have contributed to deprivation; one belief system prevailing today is that economies best operate outside democratic accountability and according to one rule: highest return to existing wealth (i.e. company shareholders). As a result, wealth and decision-making power inevitably concentrate to serve a minority, depriving many of life necessities, including food.

Thus, ending hunger is less about supplying missing 'things'—seeds, water, fertilisers—to increase supply than about letting go of a failing ideology and embracing a values-driven approach that aims to achieve greater equity and creativity in human relationships. This emergent approach re-embeds economic life in networks of relationships shaped by shared human needs and values: fairness, efficacy and regard for future generations.

## Key terms

- cooperative
- food sovereignty
- frame
- Global South, Global North
- genetically modified (GM)
- Green Revolution
- microcredit

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- one-rule economics
- participatory budgeting
- sustainable farming/agriculture

# Introduction: What is the prevailing frame for explaining and alleviating hunger and what are its shortcomings?

## The scarcity frame

‘Within a decade no man, woman or child will go to bed hungry’, declared Henry Kissinger at the first World Food Conference of government and business leaders in Rome. That was 1974. Yet, more than a quarter century later, 854 million people are undernourished (UN FAO 2006a, p. 8). More recent initiatives set specific hunger-ending goals. In 1996, at the World Food Summit, also in Rome, national leaders from 186 countries pledged to halve the number of hungry in the world by 2015 (World Food Summit 1996). Then, in 2000, world leaders committed to Millennium Development Goals (see Box 2.1), with specific targets for reducing the scourges of poverty and hunger by 2015 (UN Development Programme 2003, p. 1).

## Box 2.1 UN Millennium Development Goals

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development

Source: UN Millennium Development Goals (2007)

Such global initiatives and much of the vast literature about the roots of hunger assume one cause—scarcity. People go hungry because something (usually a lot) is lacking: fertile soils, modern technologies, quality seeds, irrigation, roads, know-how and, therefore, food itself. From this **frame**, the solution is clear. We must alleviate these scarcities by extending the industrial countries’ successful economic model to those left behind.

Over the last half century, this diagnosis has stayed remarkably consistent. Only the face of scarcity has changed. In the 1970s it was Bangladesh, the ‘basket case’ that for many people proved humanity had overrun the earth’s capacities (see Box 2.2 on population). Today, the face of scarcity is Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa now suffers the highest prevalence of chronic hunger in the world, afflicting roughly one-third of the

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population (UN FAO 2006a, p. 23); and we are encouraged to believe the primary reason to be due to the physical geography of the region. Observers emphasise the region's deficiencies—its lack of fertile soils and irrigation resulting in grain yields just one-third of what Asia and Latin America produce; 'its lack of medicine, medical care and education resulting in a disease burden that cuts three decades off life expectancy compared to the industrial countries' (Sachs 2005, pp. 204-208).

## Box 2.2 Taking population seriously

Despite the evidence, many people see high birth rates and hunger in the Global South and arrive at what seems like commonsense: just too many mouths to feed. But scanning the globe, no correlation between people density and undernourishment is to be found. High birth rates are best understood not as a cause of hunger but as a symptom. Along with hunger, they are a symptom of powerlessness, especially of women denied control over their fertility. Mounting evidence from around the world suggests that as people, especially women, gain education and income, fertility rates decline. Thus, to move human numbers into balance with ecological limits requires an end to poverty and hunger (Lappé et al. 1998, pp. 25–41).

The most commonly proposed solution has also held steady. In 1960 American economist W.W. Rostow released *Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, a title that captured well his cure for poverty; and soon the approach became gospel for a generation of development theorists. Four decades later, Jeffrey Sachs (2005), champion of the UN's Millennium Development Goals, saw the solution as the 'dynamism of self-sustaining economic growth' and called on the industrialised societies to fulfil their obligation to help the poor get their 'foothold on the ladder'. Sachs emphasised the need for more aid, more effectively given (Sachs 2005, pp. 73, 329–46).

Paralleling the overall growth prescription, the message about how to improve agriculture echoes through the decades: feeding the world requires 'modernising' agriculture by making it more like industry. Practices of over a billion poor farmers must become more and more standardised through global corporate chains supplying inputs—fertilisers, pesticides, seeds, machines—and buying and distributing outputs. In this model, farmers become links in an ever more uniform, commercial and global system (Sharma 2005).

Appealing to the belief that inadequate production is the root of hunger, in the 1990s multinational agribusinesses began to claim that their **genetically modified (GM)** seeds, in which genes from another species have been inserted, were the answer. In 2006, two large US foundations announced a major initiative to address Africa's scarcity crisis through improved commercial seed and fertiliser distribution (Rockefeller Foundation and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 2006). Their goal was to jump-start a **Green Revolution** in Africa like the one centred in Asia that has almost tripled grain output in 40 years.

Within this frame, China and India are toasted as development 'miracles'. The focus is on China's success in cutting the number of hungry people by a quarter, to 146 million, in the period 1990–92 to 1995–97 (UN FAO 2006b). Regarding India, the

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international press has focused on grain production increases associated with the Green Revolution and its strong economic growth rates.

## Shortcomings of the prevailing frame

We breathe in like invisible ether this scarcity-as-cause and economic-growth-as-cure framing, making it difficult even to register the contradictory evidence that is all around us. Worldwide, agricultural production per person has grown by 20 per cent since 1980 (UN FAO 2006c, p. 1). Yet, 'far from decreasing, the number of hungry people in the world is currently increasing—at the rate of four million a year', noted UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) director-general Jacques Diouf in 2006 (UN FAO 2006d). Yet, because Diouf's alarming words did not fit the prevailing frame, they seemed to slip by with little media coverage.

Similarly, given India's much-touted development 'miracle', few seem to register that India is home to 212 million undernourished people, more than in all of Sub-Saharan Africa. Or that India's progress in reducing hunger came to a halt during the booming 1990s (UN FAO 2006a, pp. 32–3), and today, almost half of India's children suffer malnutrition (World Bank 2005). These realities run counter to the popular image of India as an emerging region for 'call centres' and software developers.

Turning to China, the prevailing market frame also lacks explanatory power. There, productive advances have come less from a Western market model than from a form of 'state interference and violence', writes Wang Hui, research professor at Qinghua University in Beijing (Schell 2004). While statistics show a dramatic reduction in hunger in the first part of the 1990s, the number of hungry people rose during the periods 1995–97 and 2002–04 (UN FAO 2006c). Moreover, much of China's growth is being created, with staggering ecological damage, by the 120 to 130 million people surviving on less than US$1 a day with no protection of their labour rights (China Daily 2006).

Through the scarcity frame, Sub-Saharan Africa suffers hunger because of every sort of deficiency. But how does this view sit with the reality that 11 Sub-Saharan countries have reduced the prevalence of hunger to less than the 20 per cent still found in 'booming' India (UN FAO 2006a)? Or that the West African country of Ghana has made more rapid progress than any country in the **Global South**—already surpassing the World Food Summit goal of reducing the number of undernourished by half by 2015 (UN FAO 2006a, p. 24)? And how does the view of Africa as devoid of wealth hold up against the fact that it is home to one-third of the world's mineral reserves and is among the top five exporters of key agricultural products, including coffee, tea, cocoa and cotton? Further, in diverse settings African farmers are achieving striking improvements in agricultural productivity and general well-being by working with local endowments. Their successes, to which we turn later, belie the premise of lack.

Finally, viewing poor countries as simply lacking resources blinds solution-seekers to the systematic undervaluing and depletion of indigenous wealth that has occurred over centuries of colonial control and through subsequent externally driven 'development' strategies. One consequence of colonialism, for example, was the neglect, and in some cases, suppression, of roughly 2000 African native grains, roots, fruits and other food plants to the point that some scholars call them the 'lost crops of Africa' (National Research Council 1996; see also Rodney 1973). Solutions depend on acknowledging such losses so that they can be reversed.

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Additional pitfalls of the dominant frame concern the ecological viability of its prescriptions. The prevailing view assumes humanity can continue increasing food output by spreading fossil-fuel based fertilisers and pesticides, and other technologies, including GM seeds, and can feed the hungry via long-distance, corporation-created supply chains. Yet this approach has already wrought vast ecological damage, virtually none of which is registered in the price of food (see Chapter 3 for further details). Over time, such **one-rule economics** shifts diets towards processed foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar because these bring higher returns to food industry shareholders than do healthier, whole foods. Thus, worldwide, diet-related diseases, including heart disease and obesity, worsen even among the poor (Gardner & Halweil 2000). Furthermore, some GM foods have been linked to increased ecological and health risks (see Chapter 4; Smith 2007).

It is assumed that the dominant market-driven growth solution has already proven it can conquer hunger. But where the model is most firmly entrenched, in the USA, over five pounds (or two kilograms) of food (imagine eight loaded dinner plates) are available each day for each person. Yet, 38 million Americans live in households suffering from hunger or on the precipice of hunger, a number that has risen since 2000 by about a million a year (Nord et al 2005).

In the dominant frame, agricultural progress means less government involvement and greater farmer dependence on technologies purchased from global corporations, where control is increasingly concentrated. One company, Monsanto, for example, is the source of over 80 per cent of GM seeds (ETC Group 2005). Consider what India teaches about the viability of this approach for poor farmers with no economic 'cushion'. In the 1960s, millions of poor Indian farmers began taking on debt to buy costly inputs, including hybrid seeds. While these seeds are typically called 'high-yielding' varieties, they are more accurately 'high-responding'—producing more in response to irrigation and fertilisers if protected by pesticides, all of which cost farmers money. Rice and wheat displaced diverse, often highly nutritious food production. For many farmers costs rose and yields flagged over time as pests acquired resistance and soil became degraded. At the same time, prices sank, and, beginning in the 1980s as international lending agencies insisted on anti-government, pro-market policies, the Indian government cut its farm (and consumer) protections. As a result, many poor Indian farmers were bankrupted and lost their land (Shiva 1991, 1993; Shiva et al. 2002), and 150 000 have committed suicide since 1993 (BBC 2007). Even the world's richest country, the USA, lost 15 000 farms per year on average between 1999 and 2003 (National Agricultural Statistics Service 2005). An approach that destroys healthy rural communities is not socially viable.

In the dominant frame, as farm technology progressively replaces human labour, farmers and rural workers migrate to urban centres (Sachs 2005, p. 36). Yet, mega-cities in poor countries are already miserably overcrowded and lack basic services. Moreover, by 2015, two-thirds of the world's largest cities are projected to be coastal, where rising sea levels due to global warming could severely disrupt life (Worldwatch Institute 2007, p. 120). More generally, the dominant frame's economic formula leads to a deepening wealth divide that growth itself does not close. Even during the booming 1990s, every one hundred dollars in economic growth worldwide brought just *60 pennies* to reducing the poverty of the world's billion poorest people (Woodward & Simms 2006, p. 3). As the world economy has grown over the past 40 years, the income chasm separating the top fifth and the bottom fifth of the world's people has more than doubled (UN

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Development Programme 1999, p. 36); and 80 per cent of people now live in societies where inequality is increasing (UN Development Programme 2005, p. 36).

The dominant frame suggests that increased foreign aid is a viable solution to world hunger. While greater resources transferred to poor communities could help people build power over their lives, aid does not necessarily touch many of the deepest roots of hunger (see below) that rob poor people of power in the first place. Plus, the realism of counting on markedly increased aid from the industrial nations as a primary solution must be weighed against the historical record. While the industrial nations pledged almost four decades ago to increase foreign development assistance to 0.7 per cent of Gross National Income, today this assistance is at 0.25 per cent, or US$79 billion annually, still only a third of the way towards their goal (Hirvonen 2005).

Focusing on official foreign assistance also ignores how much of it functions not to end poverty but to promote a donor's foreign policy goals. Half of US aid is considered military and 'economic, political/security' assistance; and almost three-quarters of total US foreign aid goes to Middle Eastern countries that the USA sees as strategically vital, especially Iraq and Israel (Nowels & Tarnoff 2004). Among nations, the USA makes the largest absolute contribution, but only 30 per cent of total US aid is development assistance (Nowels & Tarnoff 2004, p. 5), and less than half of that goes to the world's poorest counties (NetAid.Org 2007). For aid to be effective, it needs to reject the scarcity frame. Alternatives are outlined in Box 2.3.

## Box 2.3 Empowering aid

Despite the limits on the effectiveness of aid because of how donors define their interests, some nations use foreign aid to get at the roots of hunger. They see their interests in the advancement of poor people and grasp that aid passed through anti-democratic elites will not serve that goal. So they directly support local nongovernmental groups in poor countries working to empower their own communities.

Among nations with reputations for supporting social movements attacking the roots of hunger are the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium and Canada. Some have backed effective social movements, highlighted below, particularly in their take-off stages. Moreover, certain organisations that began as charities—Oxfam, for example, whose name derives from its 1942 founding as Oxford Committee for Famine Relief—have continued to evolve. Their strategies now include not only direct aid but public education and lobbying campaigns in the **Global North** to change the policies mentioned above that impoverish the Global South.

Other broad citizen anti-poverty movements like the Jubilee Debt Campaign and the Make Poverty History Campaign, both based in the United Kingdom, focus citizens' attention not on saving the pitiful, bereft poor abroad, but rather on removing obstacles—onerous debt repayment and discriminatory trade rules—that deplete the resources of poor countries. The Debt Campaign is calling for a complete cancellation of the debts of poorest counties. When such efforts help citizens in the Global North question the prevailing economic rules that work to generate poverty from plenty, they help not just the poor abroad but themselves as well.

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## What are the real roots of hunger?

To begin to make sense of this confusing picture, we have to dig deeper. While the proximate cause of hunger is that a person lacks food, we must ask—why? There is no absolute lack of food; the world produces more than enough food for all to thrive, even after subtracting the third of world grain fed to livestock, which return in meat only a fraction of the nutrients fed them (UN FAO 2002). Even where millions go hungry—from Brazil to India to Africa—food is exported. Hunger is a symptom of a deeper lack—it is a lack of power.

Taken to its Latin root *posse,* power means simply our capacity to act. It is a dynamic quality in all human relationships. Since all life seeks to sustain itself, life-destroying hunger is proof that people have been denied power, denied the capacity to protect themselves and their offspring. In other words, since the world's supply of food is more than adequate, and no one *chooses* to go hungry, the very existence of hunger is a sign of power imbalances so extreme that some people have been made powerless even to meet their survival needs.

While most attention to hunger focuses on *things*, to end hunger we must refocus on *relationships among people* for it is these relationships that determine people's capacities, their power to create and to access those things humans need to thrive. Immediately, attention shifts from better seeds or new roads, and moves to how power operates from the village level to the level of international commerce. Consider the following ways in which hunger-causing power imbalances are manifested.

*Concentrating control over land*. Since arable land is necessary to grow food, rural people without land are vulnerable to hunger. Power at the root of hunger shows up, therefore, in land ownership. In Guatemala, for example, two per cent of the population controls 72 per cent of the land (Krznaric 2005, p. 5). In Brazil, one per cent of the population owns almost half the arable land, leaving much of it idle (Kingstone 2004). In South Africa, 80 per cent of arable land is still owned by a white minority that is just 10 per cent of the population (BBC 2005).

*Shrinking share of profits for poor producers*. Over a billion of the world's poorest people are small farmers, many producing for export. Their livelihoods, and thus whether their families go hungry, depend on the prices they receive for their crops. Yet, the 'global commodity markets' on which they depend 'are increasingly dominated by fewer global transnational corporations', writes Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Jean Ziegler (2004, pp. 9, 13), of the UN's Commission on Human Rights, adding that global corporations 'have the power to demand low producer prices, while keeping consumer prices high, thus, increasing their profit margins'.

The real prices farmers received for their agricultural commodities fell almost 80 per cent in 40 years (UN FAO 2004b p. 10). The consequence is that farmers themselves retain a shrinking share of economic benefit to be made from exports. Among them are 25 million coffee producers, working only a few acres (Oxfam America 2006). A decade ago the countries in which they live—from Guatemala to Vietnam—retained roughly 30 per cent of coffee revenue. Today they keep about 10 per cent. The winners aren't consumers but the four largest coffee companies, Nestlé, Philip Morris-Kraft Foods, Procter & Gamble and Sara Lee/Douwe Egberts, which together control almost half of

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the market (Vorley 2003, pp. 24, 25). In addition to controlling and thus benefiting most from agricultural exports, multinational corporations often work with powerful local interest groups to profit from extracting other resources—from tropical woods to diamonds to plant germplasm (Mgbeoji 2006).

*Trade rules favouring the already wealthy.* World trade flows have tripled over the last two decades, but the share of exports from the world's 48 poorest countries has dropped by almost half, to a negligible 0.4 per cent (Oxfam Great Britain 1999, p. i). If all poor countries increased exports by merely 5 per cent, the additional revenue earned, US$350 billion a year, would be seven times larger than the foreign aid they receive. Yet, industrial nations, beholden to corporate interests, maintain barriers against imports from the Global South ate on average four times greater than from other wealthy nations (Oxfam International 2002, pp. 7, 50).

Two further examples illustrate how distant power relationships directly generate hunger in the Global South. In the USA, just 10 per cent of farms have come to produce two-thirds of agricultural products (Public Citizen 2005). These largest operators, along with large food processing corporations that profit from cheap raw materials, then wield enough political power to secure enormous public subsidies, including US$165 billion going to farmers from 1995 through 2005, of which 73 per cent went to just 10 per cent of recipients (Environmental Working Group 2006). One result is that 25 000 US cotton growers receive on average US$200 000 yearly from taxpayers, allowing them to prosper even while selling cotton so cheaply that it undercuts the livelihoods of Africa's 20 million cotton growers (Rusu 2006; USDA Economic Research Service 2006). Total government subsidies paid to farmers in industrial countries come to US$279.5 billion, or almost three-quarters of a billion dollars a day (Griswold et al. 2006, pp. 42–9).

In the same vein, poor Mexican corn growers saw prices for their crops drop by almost half after their government, responding to interests of large food processors, signed a 1994 trade agreement with the USA allowing subsidised US corn to flood Mexico (King 2005, p. 115). To protest this type of unaccountable power leaving small farmers in ruins, South Korean farmer Lee Kyung Hae immolated himself in 2003. 'What would be your emotional reaction', his suicide letter asked, 'if your salary drops suddenly to half without knowing clearly the reason' (Rosset 2006b, p. xiii).

The result is what some economists call 'immiserating trade'—as in 18 poor countries where during the 1990s exports increased while private consumption per person fell (UN Conference on Trade and Development 2004, p. 152). In coffee-export dependent Guatemala, for example, as coffee prices skidded, undernourishment spread from 16 to 23 per cent of the population between 1990–92 and 2002–03 (UN FAO 2006a, p. 19).

*Debt burden falling on the poor.* In other ways as well, poverty and hunger are not static states of 'lack' but are actively generated. Poor nations are paying US$200 billion in debt repayments each year to wealthy nations, roughly four times more than they receive in foreign aid (Shah 2006). Yet most of this onerous debt was incurred not by or for the poor majorities who are suffering under the burden of repayment, but by elite-dominated governments. In many cases loans were taken by brutal dictators like Mobutu Sese Seko in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, who used the funds to enrich themselves (Hanlon 1998). Over the last decade, citizen campaigns for debt relief have succeeded in eliminating about US$76

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billion of the debt load on the 20 poorest countries, but 150 poor countries are still paying on a total US$2.8 trillion debt in 2005, at the rate of about half a trillion dollars a year (Jubilee Debt Campaign 2006).

Rules governing trade, government subsidies, debt and more are made by the economically more powerful and serve to transfer wealth and potential wealth from poor to rich. By 2006 this resulted in a net annual transfer of US$658 billion from poorer countries to wealthier countries, while a decade ago the balance was even (UN World Economics Situation and Prospects 2007). The unequal distribution of global income has been represented as a champagne glass, as in Box 2.4, which shows a world in which the richest 20 per cent (the widest top of the glass) have 75 per cent of the world's income, while the bottom 60 per cent of people (the narrow stem) live on around 6 per cent of global income.

Box 2.2: Unequal distribution of world income: The Champagne-glass effect

Insert Box 2.4 Unequal distribution of world income: The Champagne-glass effect: Note the authors have requested this box be redrawn.

Source: Adapted from UN Development Programme (2005)

## The power of beliefs

Power imbalances have always been created and maintained not by brute force alone but by belief systems that justify them and encourage their embrace even by those suffering from their consequences. In earlier societies, extreme inequalities have been justified by such notions as a chief's lineage, a caste's inherited rank, a king's or, in Islamic societies, a caliph's divine right. In many places these beliefs still hold sway. Yet today the belief system that industrial countries, especially the USA, are spreading throughout the world justifies power inequalities in the following way: to be effective, economic life must be driven by a single goal, that is, the highest return to corporate shareholders, a small fraction of humanity; and it must operate in response to supply and demand market cues operating independently, largely without accountability to democratic polities. In effect, then, the economic system's *raison d'être* is to return wealth to the wealthy. In this chapter, the shorthand for this ideology is 'one-rule economics'.

Through conditions on aid and trade set by international agencies, such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), the logic of one-rule economics has penetrated economies throughout the world. Beginning in the 1980s, most countries in the Global South were required, in order to receive foreign help, to cut back government's role in guiding the economy and to reduce public sector spending on education and health care while opening local markets to increased penetration by global corporations (Bello et al. 1994). Extreme imbalances in wealth and power, making hunger inevitable, flow from this belief system. Fortunately, though, alternative understandings are gaining ground.

## How are people effectively uprooting hunger?

As more and more people abandon the flawed premise that hunger is about 'things'—the lack of them—and begin to see hunger as symptomatic of extreme imbalances in power in human relationships, much changes. They see possibilities for constructing new norms

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as well as ever-more democratic decision-making bodies; they begin to grow and distribute food and to create communities in ways more consistent with their interests and values.

## Realism and hope

In order to act, however, human beings must have hope that the situation can change. So it may be helpful to note that the human qualities most needed to address power imbalances at the root of hunger are increasingly recognised as universal. The dominant economic model's assumption that human beings are motivated only by narrow self-interest is being replaced by an appreciation of common human needs for fairness, efficacy and meaning (Hauser 2006; World Bank 2006, pp. 76–88).

During the long sweep of human social evolution such extreme imbalances as those now generated by one-rule economics appear to be an aberration, at least in terms of access to food. For over two million years hominids—our precursors—evolved as hunter-gatherers; as did we *Homo sapiens*.. Studying hunter-gatherer societies, anthropologist Michael Gurven concluded that humans are unique in their 'pervasive sharing' of food 'especially among unrelated individuals' (Gurven 2004, pp. 543–83). Except in times of extreme privation, when some eat, all eat. The most productive hunters, it turns out, share the most (Alvard 2004, accompanying Gurven 2004, pp. 543–83). In more recent eras, too, a norm of mutual responsibility concerning food was widespread, as suggested in the origin of the word 'lord'. It derives from *hlaf-weard* (loaf-guardian), reflecting the early Germanic tribal custom of superiors being responsible for ensuring access for all. Note also that far short of achieving truly fair participation in power, even a minor righting of the balance would result in a striking alleviation of suffering. The International Labor Organization (ILO) notes that a shift towards the world's poor of only two per cent of the global Gross National Income could furnish all poor people minimum income security, as well as meet basic educational and health needs (Somavia 2004, p. 38).

## Towards the end of hunger

With such a realistic sense of possibility we can then ask: How are people expressing their deep needs for fairness, efficacy and meaning by gaining power over the health of their communities and our planet's future? From the village level to the level of international commerce, growing numbers of people are working effectively to end hunger and poverty by:

1. freeing their political systems from control by concentrated wealth through economic and political rules to keep power equitably shared and to expand citizen engagement in problem solving
2. creating fair and efficient economies by ensuring that access to life's essentials—food, land, health care, and education—are governed by standards that sustain life, including fairer business and financial models, not simply by supply and demand
3. building knowledge-intensive, ecologically sound agriculture sustained by the ongoing learning of farmers who increase available food as they sustain eco-systems.

These points will be examined in detail below.

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### 1. Freeing political systems from the influence of money

In the effort to free the political process from the control of wealth, consider Bolivia, where almost a quarter of citizens, mostly among the indigenous population, are undernourished despite rich agricultural resources (UN FAO 2006a, p. 32). Thus, when the first president of indigenous-majority origin, Evo Morales, was elected in 2006, many wondered how a poor majority overcame long-entrenched minority power.

Most important are decades of community organising in which those disenfranchised began to realise their united power. Also, public financing of campaigns has at least begun to remove the grip of money on Bolivia's electoral process, as is true of other Andean countries. In an interview soon after his election, President Morales (2006) stressed the importance of public financing of campaigns. He himself took no private money and after the election returned back to the state half of the million dollars in public funds he'd received. Not bound by expectations of wealthy donors, Morales moved forward on land reform, the hunger-fighting potential of which is enormous when considering that today the wealthiest 7 per cent of Bolivians control roughly 90 per cent of the land (Reel 2006).

Nowhere does the goal of freeing politics from the influence of money seem more distant than in the USA. Yet, even there, voluntary public financing of elections, called 'Clean Elections', is already succeeding in two states to remove the influence of wealth and to bring candidates without private wealth into the democratic process. In 2005, a third state approved the approach; and campaigns for Clean Elections are under way in about a dozen more states. With the influence of wealth removed, elected officials seem more likely to reflect the values of the majority of Americans who place ending poverty (and therefore, hunger) as a top priority (Public Agenda 2004).

## Citizens use governments for ending hunger

In India, the southern, densely populated state of Kerala teaches lessons about the significance of viewing hunger through the lens of power in human relationships, not of a scarcity of things. Since the 1950s, citizens of Kerala have viewed government as a means for developing people's power to achieve greater fairness. They regularly elected progressive governments, which in 1969 instituted a distributive reform enabling 1.5 million tenants to become small farm owners (Franke & Chasin 1994, p. 58). Aware that good health and literacy also enhance one's power, Keralians made access to health care and education top government priorities (Isaac & Franke 2002, p. 16). In 1989, a massive government-sponsored literacy campaign used 50 000 volunteer trainers to virtually wipe out illiteracy. By the late 1990s, Kerala's citizens, whose incomes are about 5 per cent the size of average Americans, had achieved literacy and life expectancy rates roughly 90 per cent of those in the USA (Franke 1999).

Just a decade ago Kerala's political culture took a further huge step towards equitable participation in power. Through a People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning, control over 35 to 40 per cent of the state's development expenditures devolved to more than a thousand local governments. The People's Campaign trained hundreds of thousands of citizens in budgeting and planning, and local governments created participatory exercises in which citizens directly shaped policies and projects. Compared

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to previous, more centrally prepared plans, results include a greater share of resources benefiting the poorest with greater emphasis on education, sanitation, safe drinking water, improved housing and environmental protection (Isaac & Franke 2002; Brizzi et al. 2005).

Similarly, in Brazil **participatory budgeting** involves citizens in determining the use of as much as a fifth of a city's budget through multi-step, face-to-face neighbourhood deliberations. Hundreds of Brazilian cities now use the approach, which is shifting resources to those who most need them (Baiocchi 2003, pp. 47–50; Baiocchi 2005, pp. 12–13).

While in diverse cultures citizens are learning to create democratic governments accountable to their values, many people still see government's responsibility in ending hunger as, at most, the provision of things to hungry people—food, a minimal dole, homeless shelters, and so on. None of these things, however, necessarily expands citizens' power to create, over time, the lives they want. But if one reconceives government's primary roles as those of *convener* of key interests in creating solutions plus *standards-and-rules setter* to ensure fair human relationships, then government can expand power to create sustainable solutions to hunger.

Consider the experience of Belo Horizonte above. As convener, the city government's food security agency brings small local farmers together with city markets and school-food providers and other institutions. It links university researchers with citizens' groups to post weekly notices of stores offering the best food prices. As rule setter, the city requires the farm produce stands, that are allowed to use prime city-owned plots, to sell food at below market prices. Here, both farmers and poor people benefit because no middlemen take a cut. Another rule requires the benefiting farmers to truck produce weekly to sell in outlying poor neighbourhoods.

Government serving as standards-and-rule setter and convener of key players in addressing hunger is not necessarily costly. In Belo Horizonte, the city-led initiatives claim roughly one per cent of the city's budget (Aranha 2000). Of course, in these two roles, effective government also increases wealth, augmenting government funds. The Brazilian constitution's rule that arable land serve a social function made possible new rural communities so successful that they disproportionately contribute to local taxes (Rosset 2006b, p. 11).

Government rule-setting that establishes workers' rights to form trade unions, thus gaining bargaining power, also helps lower the risk of hunger. In the USA, for example, median salaries of unionised workers are a quarter higher than non-union (Democratic Staff of the Committee on Education and the Workforce, for Miller 2004). Imagine then, on a global scale, both the reduced poverty and lighter demands on public budgets if more governments had exercised their rule-setting power and ratified and enforced ILO conventions protecting the rights of workers. Yet almost a century after the ILO's founding, the two nations with the largest economies, the USA and China, have yet to ratify two core ILO conventions protecting workers rights to organise (ILO 2006).

It can be difficult, however, for people to see how positive interaction between government and the economy can end hunger because the dominant frame sees government and the market as enemies; in this frame the goal is to 'free' the market from government control (Friedman 1962). In fact, however, an effective market *depends on* government—on a truly democratic one answering to citizens. Without it, economies

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driven by highest return to shareholders end up in monopoly power, destroying an open market. In global food and farming industries, two companies—Cargill and ADM—control most (some report three-quarters) of the world's cereals trade. Four control most of the oil seed trade. Three companies—Cargill, Dreyfus, and Tate & Lyle—dominate the trading and refining of sugar (Vorley 2003, p. 11).

This concentration proves that corporate capitalism is not inherently competitive. Economist James Galbraith notes that 'corporations exist to control markets and often to replace them' (Galbraith 2006, p. 34). Continuing competition depends on enforcing anti-monopoly standards, another key rule-setting function of government with an impact on hunger.

### 2. Citizens creating fair and efficient economies including fairer business and economic models

What should be considered a human right, not just a commodity in the market? For increasing numbers of people one answer is food. In 2004 the UN's FAO Council adopted 'voluntary guidelines for the progressive realization of the right to adequate food' (Windfuhr & Jonsén 2005, p.15); and today 22 countries have enshrined this right in their constitutions, either for all citizens or specifically for children (UN FAO 2001).

Brazilians are tackling this right more energetically than most. There, the Workers Party, founded in 1980 on an anti-poverty platform, made possible the election of Brazil's first working-class president, Luís Inácio ('Lula') da Silva, in 2002. Immediately, Lula declared the goal of Zero Hunger and within three years his administration had invested US$14 billion towards this end. Zero Hunger moved beyond 'one-rule economics' and established food as a basic human right. This shift in frame spurred the creation of 6000 urban farms; created over 100 public restaurants with healthy food at below-market prices; and set up a system paying 11 million poor families a monthly cash dividend as long as their children stayed in school and received regular health check-ups (Aranha 2006).

Helping to guide this national campaign has been the hunger-fighting experience of Brazil's fourth-largest city, Belo Horizonte. Declaring healthy food a right of citizenship in 1993, city officials drew together voices from labour, church and citizen organisations. Their out-of-the-box innovations, coordinated by a new municipal office of food security, include fair-price produce stands supplied by local farmers, open-air restaurants serving 12 000 subsidised meals daily, and city-sponsored radio broadcasts leading shoppers to the least expensive essentials (Aranha 2000; Chappell 2006). As a result, the city's infant death rate, a widely accepted measure of hunger, fell a striking 56 per cent over the first decade of these efforts (Andrade 2006).

## Gain land, end hunger

As noted above, rural people without access to land are vulnerable to hunger. Worldwide, over 170 million landless rural people are among the world's poorest (UN FAO 2004a, p. 25), but in Brazil they have created arguably the largest and most effective citizen movement in the western hemisphere. Founded in 1980, this is the Landless Workers Movement, known by its acronym MST.

The MST began with a commonsense argument: all suffer if fertile land lies idle while eager workers go hungry. And many non-poor agreed; so much so that they

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supported a 1988 constitution that requires (Article 184) the government to insure that farmland serves a 'social function'. Using this legal underpinning as well as civil disobedience to press its case, the MST has enabled the legal transfer of land to 350 000 families, or over a million formerly landless Brazilians. Among those gaining land, infant mortality had fallen by the late 1990s to only half the national average (Rosset 2006a, pp. 312, 314). The MST has focused on organising and teaching democratic skills—such as village and business self-management, and democratic concepts—such as gender equity—that are necessary for building power. Its members' expanding power has so far birthed over 2000 settlements and 1800 schools (MST 2003).

One can see landlessness as another deficiency to be corrected; or one can, as does the MST, see lack of access to land as one aspect of powerlessness to be overcome. Where land reforms based on the first perspective have redistributed land but left beneficiaries without a political voice to secure credit and markets, farmers have gained little. But where power shifts occurred during land reform processes of the twentieth century, as happened in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China and Cuba, rural people saw big improvements in their lives (Rosset 2006a, p. 312).

## New business models to end hunger

Hunger-ending economies also require new models of business fostering more equitable power relationships. One model merges the role of owner and worker (a distinction assumed to be essential in the dominant economic model) in worker **cooperatives** that are controlled neither by a single owner nor by outside investors but by workers who are also owners. In other cooperatives, consumers own the enterprise; in social cooperatives, such as childcare, users are often the owners. In all cooperative varieties, a core principle is the equitable sharing of responsibilities and benefits.

Membership in cooperatives has more than doubled in the last 30 years to nearly 800 million, according to the Geneva-based International Co-operative Alliance. While rarely covered by the world's press, cooperatives are not marginal. They provide 100 million jobs worldwide, one-fifth more than multinational corporations offer (International Cooperative Alliance 2007). In some African countries, the cooperative movement is surpassed only by government as the largest employer (Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives 1999).

Consider India. Press reports highlight India's information-technology enterprises. But as of 2004, they provided less than one per cent of GDP and employed fewer than one million Indians (Joshi 2004); other estimates range up to three million. Missed by the press is the power of cooperatives; they not only create many more jobs but create *hunger-ending* jobs. In only three decades, poor Indians, mostly women, have created a network of over 100 000 village-level dairy cooperatives owned by nearly 11 million members (Secretary-General of the United Nations 2005, p. 6, citing Verghese 2004, pp. 25–7). Their efforts have helped India to become the world's biggest milk producer.

Note that while roughly half of global agricultural output is marketed through cooperatives, most simply supply private corporations that then brand and sell the products; and so reap much of the profit. The Indian dairy cooperative network is different; it retains control over marketing and therefore garners a greater share of the return. In Bangladesh, the Milk Vita cooperative has replicated the Indian success,

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enabling about 300 000 households to increase earnings tenfold (Secretary-General of the United Nations 2005, p. 6, citing Department of International Development 2006). Unlike trends extracting wealth from poor communities, leaving behind deprivation and hunger, cooperatives 'favor long-term development of their enterprise compatible with the interests of the communities in which it operates', concluded a 1999 report (Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives 1999, citing Secretary-General of the United Nations 1996).

## New financial models empower the poor

India's Gross Domestic Product per person is nearly a third greater than that of Bangladesh (UN FAO 2006a, p. 36), yet the latter has achieved a child death rate 23 per cent *lower* than India's (UN FAO 2004, p. 38). We can make sense of this only by shifting from a narrow focus on material resources to a mental frame centred in relationships among people.

In the early 1970s, Bangladeshi Muhammad Yunus realised that credit is a form of power. He saw that poor people who were forced to borrow from moneylenders that charged exorbitant interest rates remained poor, no matter how hard they worked. Because the low interest commercial banks would not lend to the poor, Yunus developed a new model of **microcredit** called Grameen ('Village') bank (see Box 2.5). Yunus (2006) who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, calls Grameen a 'social business', a profit-making institution serving the goal of poverty alleviation.

Grameen is only one of three large microcredit networks in Bangladesh now reaching 80 per cent of the population (Yunus 2006). Microcredit is, according to the World Bank, responsible for 40 per cent of the country's entire reduction in moderate poverty in rural Bangladesh—with an even bigger impact on extreme poverty (Rosenberg 2006). Altogether these microcredit-funded, self-directed economic activities have likely freed three times as many from poverty as are employed in roughly 3000 export garment factories in Bangladesh, where insecure jobs offer wages of 8 to 18 cents an hour (Yunus 2006).

Grameen's success helped launch an international microcredit movement, now reaching nearly 100 million borrowers in more than 100 countries (Rosenberg 2006). Among the fastest growing may be those involving no 'bank' at all. Borrowers, usually groups of poor women, themselves handle the collection and borrowing decisions. To choose one example: A project called WORTH in Nepal, beginning in 1998, where 56,000 poor women started small enterprises and generated US$3 million in new revenues during the first 18 months.

## Box 2.5 Social business creating new financial models and holistic village empowerment in Bangladesh

### Microcredit

In Bangladesh over the last 30 years, networks of learning and action groups have spread to most of the country's roughly 80 000 villages (UN Economic and Social Commission

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for Asia and the Pacific 2006). Their intent is to remove financial, learning and health obstacles that stop poor people from realising their power.

In the Grameen (‘Village’) Bank small groups of poor women join together, vouch for each others’ loans, and get credit on reasonable terms to advance their money-earning enterprises—such as weaving, dairy, chicken-production and small-scale retailing. As of late 2006, about US$6 billion in tiny loans from Grameen had gone to seven million poor people, mostly women, in 73 000 villages. Their repayment rate has been 99 per cent, and almost 60 per cent of the borrowers, the Bank reports, have now ‘crossed the poverty line’ (Yunus 2006).

Grameen is not a miniaturisation, via mini-loans, of capitalist banking as practised in the dominant economic model. The poor borrowers themselves, not outside investors, own 90 per cent of the bank; the government owns 10 per cent. Grameen is also a social movement through which borrowers commit to what they call ‘16 Decisions’—pledges to each other to take community-improving steps, such as keeping their families small, sending their children to school, building latrines and growing gardens (Yunus 1999).

## Holistic village empowerment

In 1972, another social business was created in Bangladesh by Fazle Hasan Abed when he founded the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) to aid refugees after the war of independence from Pakistan. While still officially a ‘relief agency’, BRAC earns more than three-quarters of its own budget and directly employs almost 100 000 people, BRAC 2005. By taking into account the effect on all villagers where it operates, BRAC says that it ‘provides and protects livelihoods of around 100 million people’; that is, two-thirds of the country’s entire population (BRAC 2005).

Through BRAC, almost five million poor and landless Bangladeshis, mostly women, have created over 142 000 Village Organizations. Here they meet together to address what BRAC calls the ‘principal structural impediments to their development’ (BRAC 2005). This wording itself suggests a frame of sufficiency, not scarcity; it assumes people have the talent and resources needed to improve their lives, if together they remove the obstacles in their paths. Through the village groups, BRAC members gain credit, open savings accounts and learn about their basic legal rights, gender equity, and how to maintain good health. BRAC uses ‘popular theatre’ to deepen awareness of social problems and to suggest solutions. Training and using health volunteers and paid health workers, BRAC has collaborated with the government to achieve an 80 per cent immunisation coverage. Through BRAC more than 97 million people receive curative and preventive services (BRAC 2005).

BRAC has helped to create 15 000 diverse small businesses enabling Bangladeshi producers to retain a more equitable share of the wealth they produce than do most small producers working in the dominant economic model (International Finance Corporation 2007). BRAC’s craft marketing arm Aarong helps more than 300 000 rural, mostly female artisans working in small community groups to market their diverse crafts. Because 80 per cent of the crafts are sold in the organisation’s eight Aarong retail stores, there are no middlemen to take a cut of the profits, leaving more for the artisans (BRAC-Aarong.com 2003; Ten Thousand Villages 2007). Participating in these initiatives, villagers also gain ‘confidence’, acknowledging that poor people not only need

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opportunity but also must make an internal shift to reject the frame of limitation placed on them.

## 3. Empowered farmers, ecologically sustainable solutions

Ultimately, hunger cannot be ended and remain history unless food is produced in ways that maintain healthy soils and water as well as communities. In the dominant frame, one-rule economics leads towards a particular way of producing food: a centralising, standardising system in which global corporations sell identical inputs (patented seeds and fossil-fuel based fertilisers and pesticides) to farmers worldwide who sell their crops to pay for them and to buy food. Farms become ever bigger and increasingly dependent on distant suppliers and buyers.

As alarm grows over the devastating ecological and community consequences of this model, noted early in the chapter, a very different approach is gaining ground. Often called agro-ecology or **sustainable farming**, it has both social and ecological dimensions. It promotes small farms and diversified farming to ensure decentralised power and more satisfying community relationships. Moreover, a study in 15 countries in the Global South found small farms to be two to 10 times more productive than larger ones (Rosset 1999, p. 7).

In the sustainable farming approach, farmers work with flora and fauna peculiar to their place, which is the opposite of standardisation. Pest control and desired yields are archieved by understanding and managing ecological interactions and using minimal purchased inputs. Such farming is often called 'low-input' or 'low-intensity'. Actually, it is low in use of purchased inputs but is attention and knowledge intensive. Farmers do not simply follow a manufacturer's or government agent's uniform instructions; they share their experience and, often, labour and seeds. Sustainable farming works to improve output less by applying purchased products and more by developing better methods—including double-dug beds, intercropping, composting, manures, cover crops, crop sequencing, natural pest control, no-tillage and more. The approach is proving powerful (Lappé & Lappé 2002; Pretty 2002).

In this spirit, the international movement of small farmers, La Via Campesina, is pursuing policies to enable countries to achieve what it calls **food sovereignty**—producing enough domestically to be free from hunger regardless of the vagaries of the international market. And, lest one assume it is too late to reverse the globalisation of food, note that except for oils and some fruits, 85 to over 90 per cent of food is not traded (UN FAO 2007). In response to well-organised farmer pressure, the West African country of Mali became in 2006 one of the first countries in the world to make the goal of food sovereignty explicit public policy.

From agro-ecology to food sovereignty, the key is empowered people—an insight of the founder of BRAC, Fazle Abed, in Bangladesh. In 2005, reflecting on his own approach, he noted: 'We were inspired by Paolo Freire's [*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1972] … thinking about poor people and how they can become actors in history and not just passive recipients ...'. Abed realised he could help poor people 'analyse their own

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situation, see how exploitation works in society, and see what they need to do to escape these exploitative processes'(Abed 2005, p.14).

### Box 2.6 Citizens voice their values through marketplace choices

Western consumers can also support the end of world hunger through the market. What does a market look like that is ending hunger? It is driven not by the single rule of highest return to existing wealth; rather it advances several ends simultaneously: the well-being of the enterprise, including owners and all who work in it, along with the wider community—from those living near the business to purchasers of what is made and users of services rendered. A hunger-ending market also serves the well-being of our ecological home.

Where governments beholden to corporate interests are failing to protect these multiple interests, citizens are stepping in directly, by setting standards that prevent the use of dangerous chemicals and ensure a fair return to producers. One such global effort, the Fair Trade Movement, began in Europe in the 1980s. The concept is simple: a certifying body ensures that a producer has received a fair wage and attaches a label to alert consumers. Consumers determined to end hunger then selectively choose products carrying the fair-trade labels. The Fair Trade Movement covers at least 20 products and operates in over 50 countries. Already, the Fair Trade Movement estimates that the higher prices secured through this certifying process have lifted over a million coffee-producing families out of destitution. Its commonsense appeal—that all workers should be paid a fair wage—means that fair trade sales jumped by over 50 per cent in just one year, 2004 (Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International 2005, p. 4). In England, roughly half the population recognises the fair trade label (O'Nions 2006, p. 18).

Through the Fair Trade Movement, purchasers, who have long imagined they had little power over an economy's fairness, directly ally with poor producers, who are also believed to have little power. Together, they create new power and further a shift towards equity in human relationships. Beyond the fairer return to specific workers affected, these efforts help to change norms that condone hunger-level wages.

In addition to groups covering agricultural products, parallel producer–citizen partnerships are tackling 'sweatshop' labour conditions. These efforts range from the United Students Against Sweatshops and the Fair Labor Association based in the USA to the Clean Clothes Campaign in the Netherlands. Other organisations, including trade unions, are working towards hunger-ending fair markets by insisting that trade agreements include provisions protecting workers' rights (Fair Labor Association 2007; Workers' Rights Consortium 2007).

## Conclusion

It is tempting to view hunger as a moral crisis, when it is more usefully understood as a crisis of imagination. Humanity is trapped in a failed frame, a way of seeing that underestimates both nature's potential and the potential of human nature. Exposed daily to news of deprivation alongside apparent indifference, many find it hard to hold out

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hope. How tragic; for mounting sociological evidence reveals that most humans have, inherently, what it takes to end hunger: deep needs for fairness, efficacy and meaning. The challenge is therefore to reframe hunger as a crisis of human relationships that is within our proven power to address, to search out and broadcast lessons of success and, most importantly, to fearlessly engage oneself—for, ultimately, can anyone believe that poor people, often facing great obstacles, can gain power to overcome hunger if one feels powerless oneself?

# Summary of main points

- The question of why we have world hunger has traditionally been answered by 'scarcity', with the proposed solution being economic growth.
- The dominant belief that poverty and hunger are caused by a *lack of things*—seeds, fertile soils, irrigation and roads ignores the real roots of hunger. These deficiencies are actually symptoms of *extreme power imbalances in human relationships* that are the inevitable result of, or made worse by, 'one-rule economics'.
- Generating more balanced, creative power to end hunger, citizens are working to remove control by wealth over the political process, taking responsibility for creating fairer markets.
- Citizens are devising more democratic business and financial models; and acting through their governments they are creating participatory decision making to establish standards and rules (including the right to healthy food) grounded in shared values of fairness, inclusion, and mutual accountability.
- Citizens are proving that empowered farmers, building on traditional land wisdom and advancing ecologically sound practices, not only increase available food and free people from dependence on an ever-more concentrated market; they also offer the best hope for future food security.

# Sociological reflection

- 1. What are some steps you could take to help end hunger?
- 2. What policies could your country implement to contribute to ending world hunger?

## Discussion questions

1. What is the prevailing view of world hunger, its causes and cures?
2. In searching for solutions, what does it mean to shift focus from a scarcity of 'things' to equitable relationships among people?

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3. What does power mean to you and how does the author define power?
4. What are the biggest obstacles to ending hunger?
5. What are some of the new models of economic relationships citizens throughout the world are developing to end hunger?
6. What are the most important roles of government in ending hunger?

Further investigation

- 1. What specific changes in national and international economic policies and business structures can help to end hunger?
- 2. What might the realisation of a *right* to healthy food look like in your community or nation? What would be the costs and benefits?

# Further reading and web resources

**Books**

Lappé, F.M. & Lappé, A. 2002, *Hope's Edge: The Next Diet for a Small Planet*, Tarcher/Penguin, New York: Via a journey on five continents, captures diverse, democratic approaches to more effective food systems.

Lappé, F.M., Collins, J. & Rosset, P. 1998, *World Hunger: Twelve Myths*, 2nd edition, Grove Press, New York: Takes on each of the most common misunderstandings about hunger and highlights solutions.

Pretty, J. 2002, *Agri-culture: Reconnecting People, Land, and Nature*, Earthscan, London: Emphasises the great unrealised productive potential of ecological farming methods in which farmers themselves are leaders.

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Sen, A. 1999, *Development as Freedom*, Knopf, New York: Nobel-winning economist, Amartya Sen, argues that democratic rights are essential to ending hunger, and that access to life's essentials is as important to freedom as political rights.

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### Websites

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- Focus on the Global South: www.focusweb.org
- Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy: www.foodfirst.org
- International Forum on Globalization: www.ifg.org
- New Economics Foundation: www.neweconomics.org
- Oakland Institute: www.oaklandinstitute.org
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