A Global Food Fight
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(Scripture passages related to hunger and food production follow the article)

We sat under a thatched cooking and eating area beside the small house awaiting supper. It was my and my companion’s first meal with the family, our group having just arrived in this remote village by the Chixoy River in northwest Guatemala for a week’s stay. I had been hosted with this same family the year before, and was happy to see them—Alfonso, Lucia and three small children—again.

Lucia, fine featured, thin, a bit austere until she warms up to you, began bringing the meal—a bowl of broth with a few beans, and another bowl with a stack of tortillas underneath a cloth. “Began”—that’s what I thought. Actually, that was it; there was no more coming. Even though it was our first meal with them—a time to do your best to honor your guests—and even though she and her husband had spent the day working hard at their chores, turns out this was their best. Her husband offered a couple small red peppers from their backyard garden to add a bit—well, a lot—of spice but not many calories to the meal.

Actually, there were 13 beans in all, small and black: I counted, after I realized this was all that we’d have to eat that evening.

Caption: Lucia doesn’t have much to smile about. Nor do many of the world’s people—fully 1.2 billion, according to the UN’s Millennium Development Goals—who live on less than $1.25 a day. This makes adequate nutrition a challenge for some 800 million of the world’s people. Lucia faces the multiple challenges of being indigenous, female, a former refugee, and poor. For her and those like her, life is harder—and food harder to come by.

Worst yet to come?
And they ain’t seen nothing yet. Global warming alone will demand an additional $86 billion in assistance for the world’s poor by 2025, mostly due to diminished food supply (United Nations Development Program). Keep in mind that total foreign aid from rich governments currently totals $55 billion per year. (Africa can expect a 20 percent decline in agricultural output due to climate change, and of course that continent only produces a small percentage of the world’s greenhouse gases.)

People in our own country face food challenges too. While the average US household spends just under 10 percent on food (about half of this spent eating out), the poorest one-quarter of our society spends over 30 percent of their income on food. As prices have risen over the past year, food banks have seen a 20 percent increase in visits.

Globally, however, families spend 60-80 percent of their income on food (FAO-UN). And the percentage is rising. Since 2007, there has been an 83% rise in food prices on average around the world. Rice and wheat have risen over 100 percent; cooking oil by 80 percent. And for every 20
percent rise in food prices, 100 million people are added to the ranks of the world’s poorest people, as their already meager discretionary income shrinks even farther.

And they aren’t taking it sitting down—climate change-induced food shortages in Syria led to the initial protests that eventually became a full-blown civil war.

So what is behind the current—and likely on-going—food crisis?

Show me the money
Food follows money. That old adage still rings true—those with money can have all they want to eat and more. Which is part of the problem facing world food production right now. People in nations with growing economies like China and India are wanting to move up a notch or two on the food chain, although both of these nations have millions of people who are struggling to feed themselves. Specifically, they’re wanting to have more meat—just like their richer neighbors in the West. Raising meat requires more grain and water and land than a plant-based diet—a lot more. For instance, a pound of beef requires over eight pounds of grain—and hundreds of gallons of water—to produce. And the UN recently concluded that beef production is the leading cause of global warming, thanks to the emissions of the cattle themselves and the food and chemical inputs needed to raise them.

So, along with global population continuing to grow by around 78 million mouths—I mean, people—per year, millions of these new global citizens are shifting to diets that demand more of the earth’s bounty per person. In fact, experts say world food production will need to double by 2050, even though population will have only increased by around 25 percent. The numbers say, however, that there is likely to be a widening gap between how much grain is needed in the poor world and how much will be available—a 200 million ton shortfall by 2025 is likely. The magic beans of former food revolutions—fertilizers, irrigation, new seed varieties, and now genetically-modified foods—are likely to be able to work their magic in the years to come for reasons noted below.

There are other, newer, ways that this adage is true today. Food is also following money to ethanol plants where corn is being turned into biofuels in an attempt to slake this country’s seemingly unquenchable thirst for fuel. About a third of this year’s US corn crop will be used to power cars, not feed people)US Dept. of Agriculture. To encourage this shift, the US government subsidizes ethanol production to the tune of billions of dollars a year. While some ethanol production residue does make it into animal feed stocks, experts say up to 10 percent of the current price increases in food can be pinned on US corn-based ethanol production. In addition, with the boom in corn prices, farmers are shifting fields from wheat and soybeans to make room for corn. This, in turn, drives up prices for these commodities on the world market. And leads to further destruction of the Amazon, as higher soy prices fuels slash and burn soybean farming there.

Interestingly, making fuel from corn requires a lot of fossil fuel, to the point that there is a 1.3/1 ratio of energy output to energy input to produce corn-based ethanol. This plays out in greenhouse gas emissions as well, with the corn-based product emitting about 16 pounds per gallon burned, only slightly less than the 20 pounds for straight petroleum. Sugarcane ethanol from Brazil—which we restrict by placing a 50-cent per gallon import tariff—produces only 9 pounds of greenhouse gases per gallon. (EPA; Worldwatch Institute) Ethanol production also requires a huge amount of water: one plant can draw 44 million gallons per year from already heavily-taxed western aquifers.

What else is causing this food fight? Within hungry nations themselves, there is often a historically unjust system of land distribution. To follow on with Guatemala, this Central American nation has some of the most skewed land distribution in the world, with just two percent of the population owning 70 percent of the land—and this in a country where 60 percent of the people
depend on agriculture for their livelihood. In addition, multinationals such as Dole, Del Monte and Chiquita control vast swaths of the scarce non-mountainous and most productive lands on the coast and piedmont. (Our own nation had a hand in helping these corporations retain their lands in the early 1950s—we spurred the overthrow of an elected government that was beginning to enact land reform.)

**Big Plans…and big salaries**

Aid policies of rich countries are also sometimes problematic in terms of offering real assistance to the world’s hungry masses. For instance, of a typical US food grant to a needy African country, only 40 percent actually makes it to the intended hungry families. For one thing, US law stipulates that food aid be purchased from US growers, half of which is supplied by four large agribusinesses—and that shipping be on US-flagged carriers—at an annual cost of $300 million.

Some of the food aid is siphoned off by large charities, who then sell it on the international market to raise their own operating funds. And then it can take up to six months for the food to move from here to where it is desperately needed.

On top of this, the US is the stingiest donor nation in the world when it comes to the amount of aid given in proportion to our gross domestic product.

There is also the issue of offering relief vs. promoting self-sufficiency. As the previous paragraph makes clear, there’s money to be made in offering relief. Making grants directly to programs that not only procure regionally produced—and less expensive—food, but also work at longer-term food security is neither as self-serving nor as sexy.

On a visit to Ethiopia a few years back, I met with a UN World Food Program staffer. “I can see famine coming in about a decade in parts of this country due to population pressures, bad farming practices and lack of watershed management,” he said. “With a few million dollars we could provide the training and draw on local knowledge to head this off, but I can’t get funding for initiatives like this. I need to be able to show them a starving baby—then the money starts flowing.”

Unfortunately, when either governmental or non-governmental aid groups set out to “fix hunger,” they often go about it in all the wrong ways—at least according to William Easterly in The White Man’s Burden. Top-down approaches, Big Plans, big salaries for rich-world specialists, not listening to the locals, failing to do follow-up assessments—all these and more are reasons 50 years of trying and $2.4 trillion in resources have brought so little progress for millions of people.

We all could learn something by following Jesus’ example in asking the blind man: “What do you want me to do for you?” Presuming to know what our neighbors need is almost always a recipe for failure.

caption: “White people are liars,” the Christians at Mboroko, Southern Sudan told our delegation. “It was better during the colonial period—at least white people did what they said they were going to do.”

Keeping promises, giving local groups decision-making power, staying in touch to evaluate and update, valuing their culture and faith, basing partnerships on more on relationships than resources, having solidarity rather than mission or service as our goal—these are keys to effectively and respectfully being with our neighbors.
Another perverse practice of rich nations: subsidizing agricultural production. The US will provide more in payments to our farmers this year—$15 billion—than it will give in aid to the world’s poor. And in a double-whammy, these subsidies make it possible for US producers to unfairly undersell poor-world farmers, costing them millions of dollars every year in lost revenue. So much for the Free Trade!

Other factors in the hunger equation
A key factor in families having adequate food is the status of women in a society. It comes as a surprise to many that the majority of the world’s farmers are women; they are responsible for up to 80 percent of the food production in some poorer countries. Women are hindered—if not stymied—in their roles as food-producers by many factors, including: the AIDS crisis, as they have to tend AIDS-stricken husbands, taking time and energy away from food production, even if the husband has also infected the wife with AIDS; lack of education: 60 percent of the world illiterate adults are women; economic discrimination: women often don’t have title to land or homes and thus have no collateral for small loans; gender bias: after cooking for the husband and family, the woman often gets whatever may be left, weakening her and making her more vulnerable to illness and maladies such as anemia.

Caption: An NCP-funded microcredit program in the Southwest Delta of Myanmar helps women start food-production projects that both feed their families and earn income. “In the past, all we women here in this community produced were babies,” they told our delegation.

Did we mention water? Aquifers around the world are dropping rapidly—in the grain-production heartland of the US, the Ogallala Aquifer is being over-pumped by 12 billion cubic meters a year. Looking up instead of down, mountaintop glaciers from the Sierra Nevada in the US to the Himalaya in south Asia are disappearing due to global warming. These glaciers provide dryseason water for some 40 percent of the world’s people and their crops.

And of course there’s poverty. When the poor can’t earn enough income to care for their families and are desperate for a solution, they have to do something. Increasingly fathers—and sometimes mothers—are leaving their families, not for good, but sometimes for years. They join the global mass migration to other countries to look for work—work that is often undertaken to earn money to buy land back home. Back to Guatemala: one out of three Guatemalan men has gone to the US looking for employment. Thus food insecurity tears parents away from their families in the interest of feeding them.

Higher prices for inputs such as energy, seeds and fertilizers affect US farmers, but at least some of these costs are offset in the current situation by rising prices for their produce. In other parts of the world where most food is grown for household consumption, there is no one to whom to pass on these price increases. It simply affects how much food can be grown—and brings added risk to each growing season, especially if these more expensive inputs have been purchased on credit.
Taking a bite out of hunger
This provides a good transition point to begin looking at possible solutions for this growing global crisis. Speaking of Guatemala and the cost of inputs, groups there are helping farmers wean themselves from chemical inputs and unsustainable practices. General Board Latin American staff Todd Bauer tells of farmers who now use only a “Pepsi cap” of fertilizer per hill of corn, down from many times that amount a few short years ago. “The transition to mostly organic takes about three years,” Todd told our recent Learning Tour delegation. “By then, the soil has been built up by natural means to the point that yields have met or even surpassed production once gained by relying solely on chemical inputs.” Less fertilizer means less petroleum needed for its manufacture, as well as a much better profit margin for these poor farmers. Todd is also working with partners in the Catholic organization Pastoral Social to teach farming practices that slow down the massive erosion of the steep hillsides on which most campesinos must plant their crops to survive. With the world losing some 25 billion tons of topsoil a year, these are imperative steps to stemming this loss of natural capital.

Caption: Working with poor farmers on badly-eroded hillsides, Todd Bauer and his partners in Huehuetenango, Guatemala are pointing in a new direction of sustainable production—for economic and ecological reasons.

Tom Benevento of the New Community Project is doing much the same thing—but in Harrisonburg, Virginia, where he involves poor local residents in an organic garden project not far from the city center. The workers not only learn gardening skills, but are brought on as interns in order to begin building an employment resume. And the whole operation is promoted as “carbonfree,” with the produce being transported to the local farmers’ market via bicycle trailers—taking a bite out of global warming in both the production and selling of the goods.

As poverty is almost always a big factor in food insecurity, reducing poverty is a vital step toward healthy diets, whether here or abroad. Some suggestions:

- **Buy Fair Trade** products to help small producers in other lands earn a decent income for their labors (however, even Fair Trade has its limits—see this page).
- **Support girls’ and women’s education** to lift them and their families out of poverty, and help women become income-earners, which often directly benefits the family’s nutritional status.
- Call for our government to **end subsidies** for wealthy corporate farmers, which further impoverish our global neighbors.
- **Contribute to or join groups** that work in close collaboration with the poor themselves, who are resourceful and determined but often simply lack the means or a stable enough ecological, economic or political situation to succeed.

Other actions we can take on a personal and congregational level to help ensure adequate food for a hungry world: **eat less meat** (given the grain and water inputs and global warming outputs); **reduce our contributions to global warming** (cars, consumption, and cooling and heating
being some of the top offenders); **buy locally-grown food** to break the grip of the food conglomerates and cut down on food transport (the US food supply system is responsible for about 20 percent of our carbon dioxide emissions); **make feeding the hungry a congregational priority** by adopting the suggestions above as central to the church's life and mission.

“Lord, when did we see thee hungry...?” We find all kinds of ways to reassure ourselves that when called to account for our lives, we'll pass the test. If the parable in Matthew 25 is any indication however, this is a test with only one question: how did we respond to Jesus when we met him in the lives of our poor, hungry neighbors.

**Scripture texts related to hunger and food production systems**

Isaiah 5:1-13 is a very pointed interplay between Israel as the Lord’s vineyard, and their despising of their responsibilities in that relationship by "joining house to house and field to field"—fomenting injustice by amassing land/wealth—until they are left alone in the land. Looks a lot like corporate farming to me—and the depopulated communities of the Great Plains.

Genesis 1 and 2 show the intimate relationship between adam (humans) and adamah (humus—or the ground from which humans were made), and then the tilling and keeping of the garden—active involvement in stewarding the land, and then the estrangement from the land due to their separation from their creator—only by the "sweat of the brow" would the land henceforth give fruit.

Matthew 25:31ff is the "when did we see thee hungry" passage, showing how our own fate is linked to that of our hungry neighbors—as we treat them we treat the Lord.

Matthew 6:25 this "do not worry" passage warns against over-focus on materialism, and encourage us to trust in the Lord of the harvest to provide for the human community so long as we are living according to the reign of God. Also, there is a rhythm to nature that God has put in place—if we abide by it, there is enough.

John 6:1-14—the crowd needed to be fed, the young boy opened his hand--and his lunchbox--to Jesus, and all were satisfied (some say that perhaps this wasn't so much a "miracle" by Jesus as the crowd responding to the boy's example by reaching under their robes and sharing their lunches with others—but this may be even more of a miracle!)

Leviticus 25:1-7 the year of the Jubilee—every 7th year the land should be allowed to rest—seeing the land as a relationship that needs to be respected, not just a resource to exploit endlessly (reminds me of the chickens in the CAFO operations where the lights are on 24/7 to keep them laying beyond what is their normal cycle).

Leviticus 19:9-10 the laws concerning gleaning—can't clean the field of every last grain, as we must make sure the poor and marginalized have access to food—reminds me of the way we waste so much food in our society and have legal and social mores against scavenging, as well as GMO seeds—they are the copyrighted property of the corporations—have them in your field, even by mistake, and you're in trouble—no room for "generosity" for those who haven't paid the price for the right to sow and harvest.