

Hunger hits home

The pandemic reminds us that food insecurity isn't just 'over there'

By Roger Thurow

Illustrations by Phil Wrigglesworth

Late last year, just before the coronavirus began its relentless march around the world, I joined a group of fourth graders in their crowded classroom in an Ethiopian village. Their teacher posed an adventurous question to the students: What would you like to be one day?

"I would like to be a nurse and help people."

"A doctor!"

"A teacher or a businessman."

They were answers you might hear in any fourth grade classroom, anywhere in the world. But this was no ordinary group of elementary school pupils, so I asked a follow-up question: How old are you?

The answers: 18, 18, and 21.

At the time of my visit, I saw this classroom — with half of its students aged 18 and older — as an indictment of humanity's past neglect of nutrition and agricultural development, which had allowed hunger to persist in our world. Many of these students were young children in 2003 when, in the first great hunger crisis of the 21st century, 14 million Ethiopians, many of them children, faced starvation. For the children who survived, this severe early malnutrition often resulted in stunted bodies and brains.

In this classroom, I saw how stunting can become a life sentence of underachievement. It is highly unlikely that any of the students I met — teenagers and young adults just now learning simple math and struggling to read — will fulfill their ambitions of professional careers and their desires to help others. Lost potential is the consequence of a stunted generation: What might these young people have accomplished for themselves, their

families, their community, their country — for all of us — had they not been malnourished as children?

Several weeks after my visit, the coronavirus pandemic shifted my perspective of what I had seen in this classroom. These students aren't simply showing us the effects of past malnutrition. They are giving us a glimpse into our post-pandemic future, a view of how the hunger and malnutrition unleashed by COVID-19 could carry the impact of the pandemic far into the future.

The pandemic has changed how we see hunger today,

both around the world and in the United States. The global health crisis became an economic calamity followed by a nutrition catastrophe. As businesses shut down, job losses mounted, supply chains shattered, and schools that had provided vital meal programs closed, access to food and nutrition was radically interrupted, and in many cases severely limited, for billions of people. The World Food Programme — the United Nations agency in charge of emergency food distribution as well as school meal programs in numerous countries — warned that an additional 270 million people were facing grave hunger, with children most at risk. Nutritionists predicted that stunting, which already affects nearly one of every four children in the world, would surely rise. Researchers, writing in the medical journal *The Lancet*, estimated that more than 6 million children would suffer wasting (severe underweight) and that as many as 10,000 children could die from malnutrition every month in the coming year.

17 million

Additional Americans facing food insecurity in 2020 because of the pandemic

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These students are giving us a glimpse into our post-pandemic future, a view of how the hunger and malnutrition unleashed by COVID-19 could carry the impact of the pandemic far into the future.

The pandemic has made hunger and malnutrition more immediate, more urgent, more threatening. And that is not only happening in lower- and middle-income countries. It has also had a profound impact in one of the richest, most bountiful countries in the world, exposing a national oxymoron: hungry Americans.

Hunger has become more personal for

many Americans than at any time since the Great Depression. As the pandemic paralyzed the economy and jobs and incomes vanished, we have seen massive demand at food banks and pop-up relief pantries — perhaps we have even been there ourselves or recognized our relatives, friends, neighbors, or co-workers in those crowds. We have seen highways come to a standstill with epic traffic jams at drive-through bread lines. We've seen the mad scramble to replace the subsidized breakfast and lunch programs once provided by now-closed schools. We've experienced the frantic dash to grab whatever food remains on the shelves of the grocery stores. At the same time, we've seen farmers plowing under crops and dumping milk and euthanizing livestock because their regular customers — the restaurants, schools, and businesses — have stopped buying.

We've seen all this and we are shocked. But we shouldn't be.

Americans hold tight to the belief that ours is a land of everlasting bounty, with amber waves of grain stretching majestically across the fruited plain, from sea to shining sea. We sing of

how “God shed his grace on thee” — on America. We believe ourselves to be the world's breadbasket, with the richest soils, the best farmers, the most advanced technologies that allow us to feed the planet's hungry, wherever they may be. We could imagine that a global health crisis would turn into a hunger crisis “over there” somewhere, in Africa or India perhaps. But in America? No way.

It is the lie we tell ourselves, blinding us to the 40 million fellow citizens who, even before the pandemic, struggled to come up with their next meal. But now we see. The pandemic has forced us to look.

The truth is that while we may indeed feed the world, we don't feed all our own citizens. It's not that we can't. It's that we won't. We allow hunger to abide. The truth is that there have always been lines at food pantries, where the shelves are always in desperate need of replenishing; that the ceaseless wave across the fruited plain is one of schoolchildren heading to cafeterias for free meals; that the one thing that does stretch from sea to shining sea is a network of 60,000-plus food pantries and soup kitchens that outnumber McDonald's restaurants by more than 4-to-1.

We see the Golden Arches everywhere, but do we see the food pantries? They are there, tucked away in community halls and church basements; many of them are served and supported by Rotarians. They are places of relief and salvation. But all too often they are also places of stigma and shame. Who are the people who need them, and what did they do wrong? To look closely would mean examining painful truths and asking, What did we do wrong?

How does this obscene oxymoron persist? How do we, in a wealthy country, a democracy that has been the envy of the world, tolerate it? Economists have

advanced a theory that there can be no famine in a democracy; surely voters would oust any sitting government amid mass starvation. But America proves that you can have hunger — if not outright starvation — in a democracy. Before the pandemic, even with 40 million food-insecure citizens, hunger rarely rated a mention in any political campaign.

U.S. Representative Jim McGovern of Massachusetts, who is co-chair of the House Hunger Caucus, tells anyone who will listen that hunger is a political condition. But its consequences aren't acute enough to prod lawmakers to take any kind of lasting, unified action to end it. There is rhetoric aplenty, and there are grand intentions. Most every politician can manage to summon a flash of righteous indignation against hunger — who could be *for* hunger? — but when it comes to spending political capital and actual money to eliminate hunger, there is eternal stinginess. When the purse strings do open, it is usually with a grudging motion and even a sneer: “Are they *really* hungry in this country?”

Over the years, U.S. legislators have enacted programs to provide nutritional aid: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, commonly known as food stamps; the Women, Infants, and Children program, or WIC; school breakfast and lunch programs. But these initiatives are perpetually underfunded, underpromoted, and under attack. As the pandemic hit, 18 million American households relied on SNAP benefits (which, although meant to last a month, rarely stretch to two weeks). Government analysts acknowledge that millions more people are probably

43 percent

Share of national food waste created by U.S. households

\$218 billion

Amount spent annually in the U.S. on food that is never eaten

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qualified to receive the benefits but are intimidated by the process of applying, or recoil with a sense of shame at the notion of receiving aid, or simply don't know it's available. And so hunger abides.

Rhetoric, like charity, is fleeting. We generously give our cans of vegetables, jars of peanut butter, boxes of pasta, and cash donations during food drives, particularly in times of natural disasters. But without decisive action to match those donations, without commitment to eliminate the problems that cause the need, the structures of inequality remain in place and, away from the spotlight cast by the emergency, the suffering continues. We have become comfortable with hunger in our midst, and, in a mockery of our displays of sympathy, Americans are the most profligate food wasters in the world: We throw away one-third of all food prepared for consumption.

We don't even call it hunger. We use a euphemism: "food insecurity," defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food and proper nutrients for an active, healthy life. According to the government's measurements, about 11 percent of U.S. households were food insecure before the COVID-19 outbreak; by late April — within one month of the start of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders — the rate had doubled to 22.7 percent. Once the pandemic's impact began spreading across the country, more than 17 percent of households with children under age 12 reported that their children weren't getting enough food (compared with about 3 percent of families reporting such hardship in 2018). Feeding America, a network of 200 food banks, calculates that it is now serving 50 million people,

up from 40 million pre-pandemic. That's 10 million more people who likely never imagined they would be reaching out for benefits in a food line. What did they do wrong? A global health crisis closed their office, their factory, their school.

Will they — will we, as a nation — look at our hunger problem differently now? Will we summon the sense of shared purpose needed to conquer COVID-19, the passion required to confront racism, the energy demanded to eliminate hunger in our most bountiful land?

Is this a moment of reckoning for our American oxymoron, now that "over there" is happening here?

I had seen, once before, the tragic, perplexing phenomenon of food surpluses destroyed or spoiled because of broken supply chains and disrupted markets, even as demand for food assistance skyrocketed — in Ethiopia in 2003.

I was a foreign correspondent with the *Wall Street Journal* then, covering development and humanitarian stories. A catastrophic progression of agricultural miscalculations, international water disputes, local market breakdowns, and drought had triggered widespread famine after two years of bumper harvests. Up on the Boricha plateau, south of the capital of Addis Ababa, I parted the flaps of an emergency feeding tent and stepped inside to a scene of utter horror.

Dozens of children were starving to death. Speechless, I moved through the tent until I came to Tesfaye Ketema, who was sitting on the floor, holding his son Hagirso. Tesfaye, all skin and bones himself, told me he had carried his boy for hours to the tent, hoping to save his life. Just a year before, he had carried his surplus crops to this very field, which

was then a bustling market. When I met them, Hagirso was five years old and weighed 27 pounds. The doctors were telling Tesfaye they didn't know if his son would survive, so severe was the malnutrition shock.

"A teacher or a businessman": That was the ambition voiced in December by Hagirso, now 21 years old, sitting in the front row of that crowded fourth grade classroom. He had survived. But he clearly hadn't thrived over the past 16 years: He was physically and cognitively stunted, still struggling to learn to do simple math, to read, and to write.

At home, on a small plot of land, Hagirso helps his father and his mother, Fikre, raise their crops of maize, potatoes, and kale, and tend to the family's cow and calf. He pitches in on community tree-planting and rain-harvesting efforts. And he is a role model for his younger siblings, who scamper after him when he walks to school. The youngest, a four-year-old brother, is named Enough — a plea to God, Tesfaye explained, that he be their last child and their last worry about malnutrition and stunting.

Enough. Will we make it our plea as well, as we look ahead into our post-pandemic future? Will we decide that we have had enough, that our new normal, however it develops, will be one without hunger? ■

6 billion

Projected number of meals U.S. food banks will provide by the end of 2020

TAKE ACTION

The Food Plant Solutions Rotary Action Group is working on sustainable ways to end hunger and malnutrition. Find out more and get involved at [foodplantsolutions.org](https://www.foodplantsolutions.org).