

Extending Justice to the Problem of Hunger

By Frederick Kirschenmann

The popular press regularly features the problem of hunger with a singular question: “How are we going to feed nine billion people by the year 2050?” The implication is that hunger is simply a problem of production and so we need to further intensify our modern system of agriculture to further increase the yields of a few crops that “saved the lives of billions of people” during the past half century.

There are, of course, several important misperceptions with this scenario. First, on a calorie per capita basis we are currently producing enough food to feed ten billion people and yet almost a billion are chronically hungry. Second, while we are producing enough food to feed ten billion people almost 40 percent of it is currently being wasted. Third, in both “developing” countries, like Africa, and “developed” countries, like the United States, there is a direct correlation between hunger and poverty. Furthermore, as de Schutter’s UN report *Agroecology and the Right to Food* points out, the problem of hunger will never be solved apart from people having the ecological resources and information to feed themselves and being “entitled” to such resources.

Of course, ultimately, we also have to pay attention to the “carrying capacity” issue. How many humans can the planet accommodate and still sustain a healthy biotic community in which we can be healthy? In other words, the question of a growing human population cannot be reduced to a simple question of whether or not we can feed everyone, but whether or not the self-renewing capacity of nature can be sustained.

All of this suggests that hunger is at least as much of a question of justice as production. Since

seventy percent of the world’s farmers are women, it is essential that we empower women in their own communities throughout the world so that they are entitled to the resources and information necessary to feed their families. Since food and water are essentials, they should not be allowed to be commoditized and financialized like other commodities. Food and water should be a right guaranteed to every person on the planet.

While this may seem like a daunting task to many of us, numerous recent UN reports, as well as cogent observations by many individuals, have pointed out that we can extend justice to the problem of hunger by investing a relatively small portion of our global wealth in the health and well-being of children, the empowerment of women, and in “social impact bonds” (early education, health care for all, appropriate job training, etc.). As numerous studies have pointed out, we could fund such “justice” issues by diverting a tiny portion of our current military spending to such efforts.

As Wendell Berry has reminded us, single tactic solutions to problems, (like just producing more food) never solves problems because problems are never isolated phenomenon, they are always a “pattern” of problems. Consequently, we have to “solve for pattern.” Extending justice to the problem of hunger is one of the most effective ways of identifying the complex, but interdependent, ways of solving the problem of hunger.

Frederick Kirschenmann is a longtime national and international leader in sustainable agriculture. He is a Distinguished Fellow for the Leopold Center and is President of Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture. He also continues to manage his family’s 1,800-acre certified organic farm in south central North Dakota.

We are currently producing enough food to feed ten billion people and yet almost a billion are chronically hungry.

Agroecology

The International Symposium on Agroecology for Food Security and Nutrition was held in Rome, September 18-19, 2014. One of the speakers, Gaetan Vanloqueren, is an agronomist who was an adviser to former U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter. He said that, “agroecology includes a set of practices, such as diversifying of species and genetic resources and the recycling of nutrients and organic matter, [but it is also] more than the scientific study of ecology applied to agriculture.... The principles of autonomy, the importance of the combination of traditional knowledge and economic knowledge, the co-construction of solutions by peasant organizations, researchers and citizens are key in defining agroecology.... Agroecology is about social equity and democracy.”

