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New Years creates in me a sort of reflective time. At my desk this New Year's Eve I found myself thinking about world hunger for God and for food. Now, I am still thinking on the former, but I wanted to share some thoughts and information on the latter.

HUNGER: 3 MYTHS

We have a hard time facing world hunger in our society. It seems so like some ancient bleeding wound that will not heal. We give to world hunger organizations, but still our national news is annually invaded with the faces of dying children from the third world, and the frustrated, near helpless medics who tend them.

I suppose part of our uneasiness rests on the fact that the developed west generally has too much food. Here in the land of plenty, many of our health problems involve our obesity, not our underweight. It is embarrassing, I know. Many do not want to be reminded that we have so very much, while much of the world has so very little. We wind up buying into some handy myths that give us guilt-free explanations for the hunger of the third world, because if we looked closer we would have to consider some responsibility for the suffering.

While searching through a 1990s text on social problems I came across some familiar claims about world hunger and starvation. The article referred to publications by two hunger researchers. Years ago (early 1980s) Francis Moore Lappe and Joseph Collins wrote of their research on world hunger. They did some myth busting that I think is still relevant today. I would like to share with you 3 common myths and their rebuttals:

Myth 1: People are hungry because of scarcity.

This concept is challenged because enough food to nourish the people of the earth is being produced. The problem is distribution-- Inadequate distribution among nations and inadequate distribution within nations. Elite classes and political power structures often determine the conditions for and amount of food distribution from within hunger tormented countries.

Myth 2: Hunger results from overpopulation.

The relationship of hunger and overpopulation is not simple. Lappe and Collins cited that highly populated China had (at least at one time) been able to bring hunger under control by utilizing existing food resources in more effective ways of distribution. In more effective ways of distribution. In addition, a false scarcity is created by poor distribution practices. Land use for food is an issue. Often existing cropland is underutilized or utilized inappropriately for the needs of underdeveloped nations why? Lappe and Collins believed the problem was involved with land ownership.

Myth 3: To solve the problem of hunger we must grow more food.

The two researchers pointed out that the problem of per capita hunger can grow simultaneously with per capita food production. How can that happen?

First, Major land ownership in underdeveloped countries is usually concentrated in the hands of a small wealthy class. Through inheritance and gifts the land usually stays in this class as generations pass.

Second, The decision of crop is crucial. These decisions tend to be made with profit in mind. Chemical crop treatments and machines are purchased from developed countries and are used to increase production while reducing labor costs. Workers are usually underemployed as modern methods replace traditional farming.

Now, back to the decision for a profitable crop. Often times the best cropland is used for specialty foods (cocoa, tea, coffee etc.), which are designed for export. That growing practice uses good land for the luxury of developed nations. Locally needed foodstuffs remain under produced. Another familiar example is that the grain grown for beef production and export does not feed local families. Neither the grain nor the exported meat will ease the hunger of people. In fact, the grain growers have often become importers of food that could have been grown on the land for the people.

Small farmers in undeveloped countries get squeezed out. The larger landowners tend to acquire more land for more profitable crop use. The price of fuel tends to make farming with machines more difficult for the small poor farmer. Often the small landowner winds up selling land to survive. Large farms grow larger and more profitable, while often hunger increases in the agricultural third world nations.

It was clear to me that researchers, Lappe and Collins believed that population and food quantity took a back seat in this issue. They pointed out that production and distribution for the elimination of hunger vs high profit luxury food production for export were major players.

Now, more than questionable farming practices and local third world politics surely contribute to starvation. But it is good to question all those near slogan explanations of world hunger that tend to let us off the hook and place responsibility for hunger on the underdeveloped countries. The wealthy west has contributed substantially to the demand and profitability of crops and meat that use valuable land in other countries for our specialty foods. We are not off the hook, not by a long shot. ja+