

**THE MYTH—Scarcity**  
**THE REALITY—There IS Enough Food**

BY FRANCES MOORE LAPPÉ, JOSEPH COLLINS & PETER ROSSET

*Editor's Introduction: In their landmark 1977 book, Food First: Beyond the Myth of Scarcity, Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins argued convincingly that scarcity was not the cause of hunger. Ten years later, in their 1986 classic, World Hunger: Twelve Myths, they demonstrated that there was still ample food being produced for everyone in the world. In both works they identified the true causes of hunger as inequality and lack of effective democracy. Over the years we have fielded many inquiries at our office questioning whether their basic facts on food availability are still valid. Adapted from the forthcoming World Hunger: Twelve Myths, Second Edition, this Backgrounder addresses those doubts (Grovet/Atlantic Publishers and Food First Books, Fall 1998).*

◀ AFRICA'S FOOD PRODUCTION HAS OFTEN BEEN THWARTED BY THE WEST.

Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins founded Food First in 1975. Peter Rosset is the Executive Director.

**MYTH:**

With food-producing resources in so much of the world stretched to the limit, there's simply not enough food to go around. Unfortunately, some people will just have to go hungry. We must put all our efforts into boosting agricultural production in order to minimize hunger.

**OUR RESPONSE:**

The world today produces enough grain alone to provide every human being on the planet with 3,500 calories a day.<sup>1</sup> That's enough to make most people fat! And this estimate does not even count many other commonly eaten foods—vegetables, beans, nuts, root crops, fruits, grass-fed meats, and fish. In fact, if all foods are considered together, enough is available to provide at least 4.3 pounds of food per person a day. That includes two and half pounds of grain, beans and nuts, about a pound of

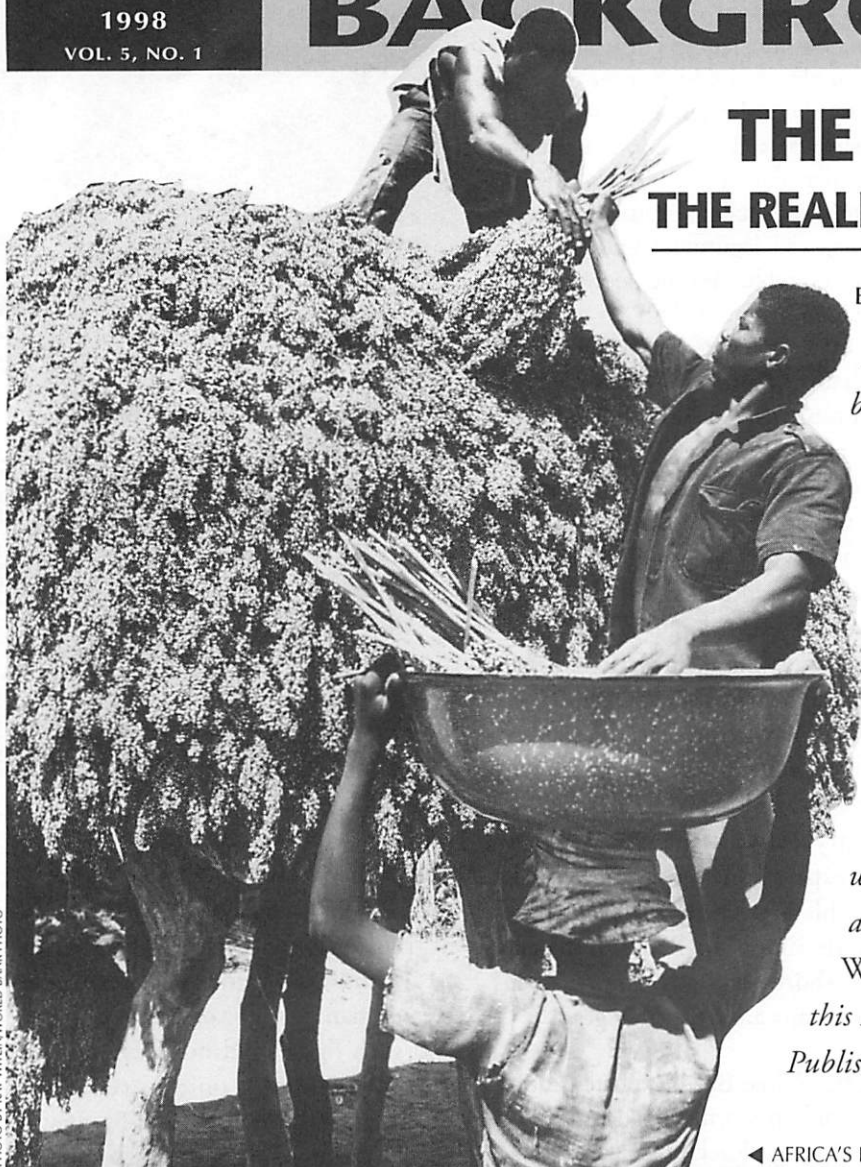
fruits and vegetables, and nearly another pound of meat, milk and eggs.<sup>2</sup>

Abundance, not scarcity, best describes the supply of food in the world today. Increases in food production during the past 35 years have outstripped the world's unprecedented population growth by about 16 percent.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, mountains of unsold grain on world markets have pushed prices strongly downward over the past three and a half decades.<sup>4</sup> Grain prices rose briefly during the early 1990s, as bad weather coincided with policies geared toward reducing overproduction, but still remained well below the highs observed in the early sixties and mid-seventies.<sup>5</sup>

All well and good for the global picture, you might be thinking, but doesn't such a broad stroke tell us little? Aren't most of the world's hungry living in countries with food shortages—countries in Latin America, in Asia, and especially in Africa?

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**H**unger in the face of ample food is all the more shocking in the Third World. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, gains in food production since 1950 have kept ahead of population growth in every region except Africa.<sup>6</sup> The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) found in a 1997 study that 78% of all malnourished children under five in the developing world live in countries with food surpluses.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, even most “hungry countries” have enough food for all their people right now. This finding turns out to be true using official statistics even though experts warn us that newly modernizing societies invariably underestimate farm production—just as a century ago at least a third of the U.S. wheat crop went uncounted.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, many nations can’t realize their full food production potential because of the gross inefficiencies caused by inequitable ownership of resources.

Finally, many of the countries in which hunger is rampant export much more in agricultural goods than they import. Northern countries are the main food importers, their purchases representing 71.2 percent of the total value of food items imported in the world in 1992.<sup>9</sup> Imports by the 30 lowest-income countries, on the other hand, accounted for only 5.2 percent of all international commerce in food and farm commodities.<sup>10</sup>

Looking more closely at some of the world’s hunger-ravaged countries and regions confirms that scarcity is clearly not the cause of hunger.

**INDIA** India ranks near the top among Third World agricultural exporters. While at least 200 million Indians go hungry,<sup>11</sup> in 1995 India exported \$625 million worth of wheat and flour, and \$1.3 billion worth of rice (5 million metric tons), the two staples of the Indian diet.<sup>12</sup>

**BANGLADESH** Beginning with its famine of the early 1970s, Bangladesh came to symbolize the frightening consequences of people overrunning food resources. Yet Bangladesh’s official yearly rice output alone — which some experts say is seriously under-reported<sup>13</sup> — could provide each person with about a pound of grain per day, or 2,000 calories.<sup>14</sup> Adding to that small amounts of vegetables, fruits, and legumes could prevent hunger for everyone. Yet the poorest third of the people in Bangladesh eat at most only 1,500 calories a day, dangerously below what is needed for a healthy life.<sup>15</sup>

With more than 120 million people living in an area the size of Wisconsin, Bangladesh may be judged overcrowded by any number of standards, but its population density is not a viable excuse for its widespread hunger. Bangladesh is blessed with exceptional agricultural endowments, yet its 1995 rice yields fell significantly below the all-Asia average.<sup>16</sup> The extraordinary potential of Bangladesh’s rich alluvial soils and plentiful water has hardly been unleashed. If the country’s irrigation potential were realized, experts predict its rice yields could double or even triple.<sup>17</sup> Since the total calorie supply in Bangladesh falls only 6% short of needs,<sup>18</sup> nutritional adequacy seems an achievable goal.

**BRAZIL** While Brazil exported more than \$13 billion worth of food in 1994 (second among developing countries), 70 million Brazilians cannot afford enough to eat.<sup>19</sup>

**AFRICA** It comes as a surprise for many of us to learn that the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, home to some 213 million chronically malnourished people (about 25 percent of the total in developing countries),<sup>20</sup> continue to export food. Throughout the 1980s exports from sub-Saharan Africa grew more rapidly than imports,<sup>21</sup> and in 1994, 11 countries of the region remained net exporters of food.<sup>22</sup>

The Sahelian countries of West Africa, known for recurrent famines, have been net exporters of food even



PHOTO BY LARRY TOWELL

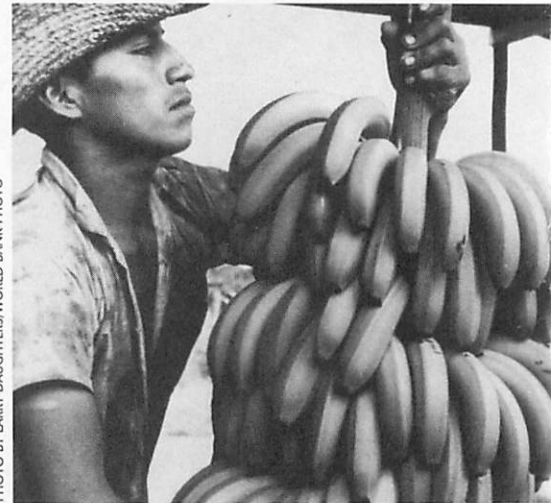


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during the most severe droughts. During one of the worst droughts on record, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the value of the region’s agricultural exports—\$1.25 billion—remained three times greater than the value of grain imported,<sup>23</sup> and such figures did not even take into account significant unreported exports. Once again, during the 1982-85 drought food was exported from these countries.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, by 1990, food production per person had apparently been declining for almost two decades,<sup>25</sup> despite the productive capacity suggested by Africa’s agricultural exports, and in 1995 over one third of the continent’s grain consumption depended on imports.<sup>26</sup> We use the word “apparently” because official statistics notoriously under-report, or ignore all together, food grown for home consumption, especially by poor women, as well as food informally exchanged within family and friendship networks, making a truly accurate assessment impossible.<sup>27</sup> In fact the author of the AAAS report referred

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**TOP:** THERE IS NO ABSOLUTE FOOD SHORTAGE IN NEW YORK CITY, WHERE THESE PEOPLE WAIT IN A SOUP LINE.

**LEFT:** ALL TOO OFTEN EXPORT CROPS DISPLACE FOOD PRODUCTION

**BOTTOM:** NOBODY BELIEVES WE FACE A FOOD SHORTAGE IN THE U.S., YET MILLIONS GO HUNGRY.



to earlier, argues that despite inaccurate statistics and misleading media imagery, hunger is actually less severe in Sub-Saharan Africa than in South Asia.<sup>28</sup>

Repeated reports about Africa's failing agriculture and growing dependence on imports have led many to assume that too many people are vying for limited resources. Africa's food crisis is real, as evidenced by moderately high rates of childhood malnutrition—but how accurate is this assumed cause of the crisis?

Africa has enormous still unexploited potential to grow food, with theoretical grain yields 25 to 35% higher than maximum potential yields in Europe or North America.<sup>29</sup> Beyond yield potential, ample arable land awaits future use. In Chad, for example, only 10% of the farm land rated as having no serious production constraints is actually farmed. In countries notorious for famines like Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia and Mali, the area of unused good quality farm land is many times greater than the area actually farmed,<sup>30</sup> casting doubt on the notion that there are simply too many people for scarce resources.

Many long-time observers of Africa's agricultural development tell us that the real reasons for Africa's food problems are no mystery<sup>31</sup>. Africa's food potential has been distorted and thwarted.

- The colonial land grab that continued into the modern era displaced peoples and the production of food-stuffs from good lands toward marginal ones, giving rise to a pattern where good land is mostly dedicated to the production of cash crops for export or is even unused by its owners.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, colonizers and, subsequently, national and international agencies, have discredited peasant producers' often sophisticated knowledge of ecologically appropriate farming systems. Promoting "modern," often imported, and ecologically destructive technologies,<sup>33</sup> they have cut Africa's food producers out of economic decisions most affecting their very survival.

- Public resources, including research and agricultural credit, have been channeled to export crops to the virtual exclusion of peasant-produced food crops such as millet, sorghum, and root crops. In the 1980s increased pressure to export to pay interest on foreign debt further reinforced this imbalance.<sup>34</sup>

- Women are principal food producers in many parts of Africa, yet both colonial policy and, all too often, ill-conceived foreign aid and investment projects have placed decisions over land use and credit in the domain of men. In many cases that has meant preferential treatment for cash crops over food crops, skewing land use and investment patterns toward cash crops.<sup>35</sup>

- Aid policies unaccountable to African peasant producers and pastoralists have generally bypassed their needs in favor of expensive, large-scale projects. Africa has historically received less aid for agriculture than any other continent, and only a fraction of it has reached rainfed agriculture, on which the bulk of grain production depends.<sup>36</sup> Most of the aid has backed

irrigated, export-oriented, elite-controlled production.

- Because of external as well as domestic factors African governments have often maintained cheap food policies whereby peasants are paid so poorly for their crops that they have little incentive to produce, especially for official market channels.<sup>37</sup> The factors responsible for these policies have included developed country dumping of food surpluses in African markets at artificially low prices, developed country interest in cheap wages to guarantee profitable export production, middle class African consumer demand for affordable meat and dairy products produced with cheap grain, and government concerns about urban political support and potential unrest.<sup>38</sup> The net effect has been to both depress local food production and divert it toward informal, and therefore unrecorded, markets.

- Until recently many African governments also overvalued their currencies, making imported food artificially cheap and undercutting local producers of millet, sorghum, and cassava. Although recent policy changes have devalued currencies, which might make locally produced food more attractive, accompanying free trade policies have brought increased imports of cheap food from developed countries, largely canceling any positive effect.<sup>39</sup>

- Urban tastes have increasingly shifted to imported grain, particularly wheat, which few countries in Africa can grow economically. Thirty years ago, only a small minority of urban dwellers in Sub-Saharan Africa ate wheat. Today bread is a staple for many urbanites, and bread and other wheat products account for about a third of all the region's grain imports.<sup>40</sup> U.S. food aid and advertising by multinational corporations ("He'll be smart. He'll go far. He'll eat bread."<sup>41</sup>) have played their part in molding African tastes to what the developed countries have to sell.<sup>42</sup>

Thus beneath the "scarcity diagnosis" of Africa's food situation lie many human-made (often Western influenced) and therefore reversible causes. Even Africa's high birth rates are not independent variables, but are determined by social realities that shape people's reproductive choices.

## A FUTURE OF SCARCITY?

A centuries-old debate has recently heated up: just how close are we to the earth's limits?

Major studies have arrived at widely varying conclusions as to the earth's potential to support future populations. In a 1995 book Professor Joel Cohen of Rockefeller University surveyed estimates put forth over four centuries.<sup>43</sup> Always a slippery concept,<sup>44</sup> estimates of the Earth's "carrying capacity," or the number of people who could be supported, have varied from a low of one billion in a 1970 study to a high of 1,022 billion put forth in 1967. Among studies published between 1990 and 1994 the range was from "much less than our current population of 5.5 billion" according to Paul Ehrlich and others, to a high of 44 billion estimated by a Dutch research team, with most esti-

mates falling into the 10 to 14 billion range.<sup>45</sup> By contrast the 1996 United Nations forecast, generally considered to be the best future population projection, predicts that the world population will peak at 9.36 billion in the year 2050, and stabilize thereafter<sup>46</sup> (projections of the maximum future population have been coming down over the past few years). This is well within what most experts view as the capacity of the Earth.

In view of today's abundant food supplies as well as the potential suggested here and elaborated in *World Hunger: Twelve Myths*, we question the more pessimistic predictions of demographic catastrophe. Only 50 years ago, China pundits predicted that famine-ridden nation could never feed its population. Today more than twice as many people eat—and fairly adequately<sup>47</sup>—on only one-fourth the cropland per person used in the United States.<sup>48</sup>

Not that anyone should take the more pessimistic predictions lightly; they underscore the reality of the inevitably finite resource base entrusted to us. They should therefore reinforce our sense of urgency to address the root causes of resource misuse, resource degradation, and rapid population growth.

## LESSONS FROM HOME

Finally, in probing the connection between hunger and scarcity we should never overlook the lessons here at home. In the 1990s over 30 million Americans can not afford a healthy diet, and 8.5% of U.S. children are hungry and 20.1% more are at risk of hunger.<sup>49</sup> But who would argue that not enough food is produced? Surely not U.S. farmers; overproduction is their most persistent headache. Nor the U.S. government, which maintains huge storehouses of cheese, milk and butter. In 1995, U.S. aid shipments abroad of surplus food included more than 3 million metric tons of cereals and cereal products,<sup>50</sup> about two thirds consisting of wheat and flour. That's enough flour to bake about 600 loaves of bread per year for every hungry child in the U.S.<sup>51</sup>

Here at home, just as in the Third World, hunger is an outrage precisely because it is profoundly needless. Behind the headlines, the television images, and superficial clichés, we can learn to see that hunger is real; scarcity is not.

Only when we free ourselves from the myth of scarcity can we begin to look for hunger's real causes. That search is what *World Hunger: Twelve Myths, Second Edition* is about. ■

**FOOTNOTES:** For a complete list of footnotes send an e-mail request to: [foodfirst@igc.apc.org](mailto:foodfirst@igc.apc.org)

### SELECTED RESOURCES ORDER / MEMBERSHIP FORM

**World Hunger: Twelve Myths, 2nd Ed.**  
by Frances Moore Lappé, Joseph Collins & Peter Rosset  
(Fall 1998) call for price

**America Needs Human Rights: Fighting Hunger and Poverty in the Richest Nation on Earth**, Eds. Anuradha Mittal & Peter Rosset  
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**Paradox of Plenty: Hunger in a Bountiful World**, Edited by Douglas H. Boucher  
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