

ENDING HUNGER LOCALLY

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How can people who are resource poor, socially excluded, economically marginalized, and nutritionally vulnerable improve their food and nutrition security? This paper argues they can be empowered through the creation of strong communities. In strong communities, where people care about one another's well-being, and do not exploit one another, people don't go hungry. This is true even where people have little money.

Strong communities can protect people from exploitation by outsiders, and they can establish local food systems that are sensitive to nutritional needs. Finding ways to strengthen communities might be an effective means for reducing hunger in the world. The paper sketches out ways in which communities can be made strong. Community-based food projects can improve food supplies and at the same strengthen the community.

Several global agencies have been working to strengthen the linkage between agriculture and nutrition. The Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition has hosted extensive discussions on how to make agriculture work for nutrition. This paper suggests the main role of agencies at national and global levels should be to help strengthen local communities. We should give more attention to localized food systems that are responsive to local needs.

The global agencies are in the best position to support research on how to strengthen local communities. There have been excellent studies of "positive deviance" in nutrition that explain why some children and some families are less malnourished than would be expected on the basis of their socio-economic circumstances. It would be useful to also study positively deviant communities. There are places like Kerala, in India, in which malnutrition levels are consistently lower than would be expected on the basis of their income levels. Undoubtedly this is due in some measure to the extent to which people look after one another's well-being.

One can propose reconfigurations of the global food system that would make it more responsive to the needs of the poor, but if those who control it are not sufficiently motivated to make the changes, not much will happen. The premise of this paper is that we are more likely to find the motivation at the local level, where people deal with each other face to face.

International agencies concerned with hunger could take a strong role in preventing the disruption of local communities, and in ameliorating the impacts where disruptions have happened. They could press for assurances that displaced peoples have a strong role in the planning of recreated communities. Part of the compensation from governments could be devoted to supporting that planning process for establishing new communities for those who are displaced.

Similar programmes could be offered to groups that have been disempowered for a long time. Instead of having them continue as neglected or exploited groups, or having governments maintain them on unending welfare programs, their governments could offer land and planning support for the groups to start new lives together in a way that would get them off the welfare programs. Some of the disempowered people might not be attracted to such offers, but others might see it as an opportunity to break out of their poor conditions. International agencies could provide support and encouragement for the design of such programs.

If the linkage between nutrition and agriculture is to be restored, it will have to be done at ground level, in the communities. High-level agencies have a role to play, but the main action should be local, in the communities. The reconnection would come not from market forces but from the fact that people care about each other's well-being. If all communities' food systems were designed to ensure that their people were well nourished, we would have a world without hunger.

We should get beyond talking about how we ought to live and actually demonstrate it. Food security for all can be grounded in the lessons learned from diverse groups living well together. Strong communities could remedy hunger when it occurs, but their main contribution would be to prevent it from ever occurring.