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Background Paper

New Hope for Malnourished Mothers and Children

by Michele Learner

Demonstrating that dramatic progress against hunger is possible in a fairly short time, Thailand has succeeded in drastically reducing its number of hungry children over a period of about 15 years. In 1982, more than half of all Thai children younger than five were underweight. By 1998, that number had dropped by 75 percent, and severe malnutrition among children had been virtually eliminated.

How did Thailand accomplish this? Through a focused initiative that mobilized people at every level of society and a concurrent nationwide poverty alleviation campaign that emphasized access to basic services for all.

Initially, the focus was on nearly 300 local districts that had been identified as having the highest proportions of hungry children. Communities tackled the problems that were most dangerous and prevalent first.

Foremost among these was what is commonly called “hunger”—protein-energy or calorie deprivation. Two other priority issues were deficiencies in vitamin A and iodine, both of which are indicators of malnutrition.

Because even mild malnutrition can cause serious, long-lasting problems for individuals and hamper the development and economic future of entire nations, improving nutrition, especially in the early years of life, is an essential part of a lasting solution to hunger and poverty.

Local efforts to address these problems ran the gamut of programs, including:

- growth monitoring to identify children at risk;
- nutrition and health advice for parents;
- supplementary feeding;
- increased production of nutritious foods;
- public information campaigns; and
- organizing a large force of volunteer community health workers—one for every 10 households.

Ending childhood malnutrition was truly a community effort. Farmers planted additional vegetable and fruit



A key part of Thailand's success was ensuring that older babies and toddlers got sufficient healthy food.

Celia Escudero Espadas

crops. Community health workers promoted healthy eating practices. Schools supplemented their lunch programs by raising chickens and cultivating fish ponds and gardens.

Villages produced their own nutritious food mixtures to supplement the diets of young children with malnutrition. These were usually made with rice, legumes, and sesame or peanuts.

Thailand's child hunger initiative remained focused on community action even when it was later expanded to give district and national government agencies more responsibilities. As the initiative continued, additional efforts included fortifying common foods, iodizing salt, expanding low-cost and free health care, and developing new strategies to produce a wide variety of foods for family consumption. They also developed commercially viable methods of food processing and marketing, and they distributed information on healthy diets for specific groups such as infants, adolescent girls, and pregnant women.

“The Thai experience is unique in its systematic implementation in every community in the country. It provides a model for a food safety net program that not only meets the immediate needs of the food-insecure but also lays the foundation for their permanent escape from the hunger trap,” reports the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

We Know What to Do

Researchers and advocates have drawn a number of lessons from success stories like Thailand as well as from the past four decades of steady global progress against hunger.

In 2008, *The Lancet*, a respected British medical journal, published a well-received set of recommendations on reducing maternal and child malnutrition. These were straightforward measures, backed by quantitative evidence of their effectiveness, which could prevent or treat most cases of malnutrition if they were carried out widely.

They include iron supplements, calcium and micronutrient supplements for pregnant women, exclusive breastfeeding of infants for the first six months, and appropriate foods to complement nursing for babies ages 6 to 24 months. (*For a full discussion of The Lancet’s recommendations, see Bread’s September 2008 background paper, “Women, Children, and the Global Hunger Crisis.”*)

Yet for all the knowledge and resources available to the global community, the problem of malnutrition for mothers and children remains urgent. More than three million infants and children younger than five died as a direct or indirect result of malnutrition in 2007.

According to Dr. Bill Frist, despite good progress since 2000 in containing some major diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, more than 40 million African babies and young children have died during the same time period, mostly from causes that are easy to treat, like pneumonia and diarrhea.



Todd Post

Mothers in Ethiopia bringing children for immunizations and vitamin supplements.

The former U.S. Senate Majority Leader, who now chairs Save the Children’s “Survive to 5” campaign, added that malnutrition both increases children’s vulnerability to such diseases and makes it harder for them to recover.

For malnourished babies who survive, the window of opportunity closes rapidly: the period from conception to age 24 months is critical to human development. Even mild or moderate malnutrition during this period causes irreversible damage with often devastating lifelong results. The effects of malnutrition make it much more difficult for individuals and families to escape from poverty.

We still have a long way to go to end childhood malnutrition, and most recently there has been a tragic setback. In 2006, 26 percent of children in the developing world were underweight, a slight decline from 1990. Over the past 18 months, sharp and lasting increases in the prices of food staples, combined with a global economic slowdown, are pushing an additional 150 million people into deep poverty. This has undoubtedly worsened malnutrition among young children.

What will it take to end maternal and child malnutrition? The problem receives little attention, despite some experts’ description of malnutrition as “the single biggest constraint facing global development efforts.” One reason for this neglect is that malnutrition is the outcome of many factors that fall across traditional categories of development efforts—and of government agencies—like agriculture, health, water and sanitation, and education.

Ending malnutrition, as the example of Thailand illustrates, takes not only the proverbial village, but the commitment and resources of regional, national, and international organizations. Political will was the key ingredient in Thailand’s success. A nation and community must *choose* to make hunger among its vulnerable groups—usually children and women—a top priority.

Beyond their own political will, most developing country governments will need international partners to tackle child malnutrition. Dr. Frist points out that although just 10 percent of the world’s population live in sub-Saharan Africa, more than 50 percent of all child deaths happen in African countries. One reason: sub-Saharan Africa has only three percent of the world’s health workers and one percent of global financial resources—and that’s with foreign aid included.

Most donor countries, including the United States, invest relatively little money and energy in effective nutrition programs, and no donor country has adopted nutrition as a core component of its development agenda.

International investments have been modest: between 2002 and 2007, assistance for nutrition (including food aid), basic water, and sanitation combined was only about three percent of all bilateral development assistance. Yet without progress against malnutrition, development efforts are largely hampered.

Looking at the Big Picture

Bread for the World has always worked in close collaboration with other advocates to develop and put into practice effective strategies to end hunger and malnutrition. In February 2009, Bread and more than 40 other advocacy and humanitarian organizations launched the Roadmap to End Global Hunger, calling for a comprehensive plan for the U.S. government to join with the international community in reducing hunger.

“In my 40-plus years of public service, there has never been such a united front, clarity of purpose, and general agreement on what actually needs to be done in order to really end hunger. Now there is,” said longtime hunger activist and former member of Congress Ambassador Tony Hall. He is currently the interim director of Bread’s sister organization, the Alliance to End Hunger.

In June 2009, Reps. Jim McGovern (D-MA) and JoAnn Emerson (R-MO) introduced the Roadmap to End Global Hunger and Promote Food Security Act of 2009 (H.R. 2817). It outlines the elements of a comprehensive plan to address hunger and recommends actions to improve U.S. government coordination of anti-hunger efforts.

“We have the resources to end hunger in our lifetimes—what we need is the political will to make it happen,” said McGovern. “The Roadmap provided us with some excellent recommendations. It is clear to me that we need a serious, coordinated strategy to effectively address hunger.”

JoAnn Emerson adds: “This legislative effort, like the Roadmap to End Hunger, outlines a comprehensive strategy to make sure this global problem gets the highest level of attention possible from the U.S. government until it is solved.”

A major strength of the Roadmap’s approach is its recognition that success in the fight against hunger and malnutrition requires progress in distinct but interconnected areas. It’s not possible to separate emergency food aid from agricultural development, safety nets for vulnerable groups, and nutrition, and argue that one of these alone will create food security. The Roadmap emphasizes action on all four fronts.

Bread has long recognized that both immediate assistance to provide food for hungry people and longer-term efforts to address underlying causes are essential. For example, distribution of ready-to-use complementary foods for children 6 to 24 months is an important strategy in fighting child malnutrition.

But just as important is addressing the root causes of household food insecurity, such as low agricultural productivity and a lack of dietary diversity because few crops that provide nutrients essential to children are available or affordable.

Because the problem is complex, success also requires tailoring responses to address the reasons that malnutrition is still a problem in a particular community. For example, while hunger clearly goes hand-in-hand with poverty, raising national incomes alone will not always reduce malnutrition.

“We have the resources to end hunger in our lifetimes—what we need is the political will to make it happen.”

– Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA)

In India, despite a decade of economic growth averaging 7 percent annually, nearly 40 percent of children under five are stunted from malnutrition. To solve the problem, there must be a comprehensive approach that addresses all the major causes.

Seizing Opportunities

The global hunger and economic crises have refocused international attention on hunger and malnutrition.

Responses to the global hunger crisis include the formation of a U.N. High-Level Task Force to seek solutions; approval of emergency assistance packages by many donors, including the United States; and a multitude of other efforts. (*For more background on the crisis, see Bread’s June 2008 background paper, “Responding to the Global Hunger Crisis.”*)

From the start of his administration, President Barack Obama has emphasized his commitment to reducing hunger. In April 2009, the Group of 20 (G-20)—which brings together leaders of the world’s major countries to address key global economic issues—met in London. During the summit, Obama pledged to double U.S. assistance for food security to more than \$1 billion in 2010.

This will be part of a new U.S. initiative on world hunger. The administration’s approach to this world hunger initiative emphasizes the principle that “it is important to focus on the full range of issues that affect agricultural development, including supporting the role of women and families in agriculture.” Further details of the world hunger initiative are expected this fall.

At the June 2009 meeting of the Group of 8 (G-8) countries in L’Aquila, Italy, member countries agreed to a renewed commitment to agricultural development. Currently, only 4 percent of official development assistance goes to agriculture even though 75 percent of the world’s hungry people live in rural areas.

The G-8 seeks to mobilize \$20 billion for agricultural development over the next three years. Of that, \$3.5 billion would come from the United States.

According to the White House, “This initiative represents not just a commitment of resources, which is significant, but also a commitment to reform the way the international community approaches food security, which is equally if not more important.”

Although the money by itself may not be enough to completely reverse decades of neglect of agriculture by both rich and poor countries, development experts have said that with the right leadership, the initiative could bring a significant shift in momentum.



Myra Valenzuela

In India, as elsewhere, the true success of development efforts is measured in healthy children.

“This would be the most ambitious international effort in many years to help millions of the world’s poorest farmers to significantly increase their crop yields to the benefit of their families and communities,” said Bread for the World President David Beckmann in welcoming the initiative. Bread also emphasizes that along with agriculture, nutrition must be an integral part of food security.

The agricultural development initiative will be further developed at the G-20 summit to be held in Pittsburgh, PA, Sept. 24-25, 2009. This will be a key opportunity for the U.S. government to help build the commitment and coordination needed to make the initiative as effective as possible for hungry people—particularly children.

Bread continues to stress the importance of honoring previous international commitments. In 2005, G-8 leaders pledged at a summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, to double aid to Africa by 2010. Although some G-8 countries have made progress toward keeping this commitment, as a whole the group has fallen short of the goal.

A Stronger World Hunger Initiative

On-the-ground development experience offers a number of evidence-based strategies that will work effectively to end hunger. These strategies can strengthen the new U.S. initiative on world hunger.

Two initial recommendations are:

- Measure success by improvements in nutritional status, especially the status of children.

Reducing maternal and child malnutrition—and hunger—requires a close look at the actual results of development assistance for children and women. For example, the Gates Foundation says that to be successful, its agricultural development grants must show “measurable improvements in the welfare of women, children, and families,” as indicated by improvements in nutrition, income, and empowerment.

But government-funded development assistance generally does not use such indicators of success, particularly in sectors like agriculture which have traditionally been considered separate from nutrition and have received little funding.

- Ensure that hunger and nutrition work follows principles of effective development assistance.

Experience has shown the need for development programs to represent a country’s and community’s own priorities, incorporate the views of all stakeholders, and be proactive in reaching those in greatest need.

Gender is a consideration that is particularly important in both agriculture and nutrition because women play critical roles in food production, preparation, and distribution, as well as in bearing and caring for children. Yet without close attention to full community participation and the realities of women’s lives, gender equity can easily elude a development project—risking ineffectiveness or outright failure.

Ritu Sharma, co-founder and president of Women Thrive Worldwide, writes in *The Boston Herald* of her experiences this summer in Burkina Faso, where she met with rural women farmers. Their daily lives include rising at 4 a.m., working small plots of rented land in 100-degree heat, walking miles to fetch water, cooking whatever food is available, and caring for children.

“Such women are the most important players in global agriculture,” says Sharma, “but they are never at the table when grand projects to combat global hunger are hatched... The women I met are looking for a hand up, not a handout. Investing in women’s access to land, water, fertilizers, farm labor, credit, and education is the long-term solution to preventing a hunger crisis.”

Advocates, development experts, and, most of all, hungry and poor people themselves understand what must be done to end maternal and child malnutrition. The new G-8 and U.S. administration initiatives offer an opportunity to take what we know—such as the comprehensive community-based approach that worked for Thailand—and put it into practice. We can no longer afford to wait.