

## BREAD FOR THE WORLD

This year in the US 2.5 million people will die of all causes and all ages, many related to over consumption. This year around the world 6 million young children will die for want of food. Today and every day around the world almost 900 million of our brothers and sisters in earth's family are hungry—three times the U.S. population.

There are other sobering facts, these revised from a list you may have seen circulating on the internet, called "It takes a Village" (I don't know if Hilary Rodham Clinton's book by that name is the source). Essentially, it's as follows: "If you could shrink the earth's population to a village of 100 people, with all the existing human ratios, it would look something like this": there would be . . .

- 57 Asians
- 21 Europeans
- 8 Africans
- 52 female
- 48 male
- 70 non-white
- 30 white
- 70 non-Christian
- 30 Christian
- 89 heterosexual
- 11 homosexual
- 6 villagers own or substantially control 60% of the world's wealth, 4 from the US
- 80 would live in substandard housing
- 50 would suffer from malnutrition
- 13 would have a college education
- 15 would own a computer

Understanding why so many of the world population lives at constant risk is not the problem. Addressing the factors is. Take Africa, for instance. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization is warning that 27 sub-Saharan countries now need urgent help. Drought is a problem in only 12 of them. The FAO cites four critical factors.

- 1 Decades of underinvestment in *rural* areas. Why rural? Because political leaders channel most of the funds to urban areas from which they receive the most support. It's also easier and cheaper to deliver to urban areas—that's where the roads are. This is compounded by corruption and mismanagement, what agencies euphemistically label

“lack of sound governance.” When Western nations granted “independence” to African and other nations in the 1950s to the 1970s, they typically left little in the way of sound political infrastructure, so mismanagement and corruption were almost inevitable.

- 2 Second, wars and political conflict lead to massive movements of refugees who either have to leave the crops untended in the rural areas, or whose exile from the cities put further pressure on the already meager supplies in rural areas.
- 3 HIV/Aids deprives families of their most productive labor. When a family becomes infected, their food production can fall by 60 %. because women, who do most of the field work, are also expected to care for the sick. 30 % of sexually active adults there are HIV positive, the equivalent of virtually every household.
- 4 Unchecked population growth. Where the US population grew by 50 % between 1975 and 2005, sub-Saharan Africa’s grew by 125%. Why do poor people have so many children? Because, as my Indian political science professor once explained, children are their insurance in old age, their food supply, insurance, social security and Medicare. And because infant mortality is so high. A huge increase in population means that land is repeatedly subdivided among families, such that it becomes over farmed. 72% of arable land and 31% of pasture land is badly depleted in its yield. The result is that a continent that was more than self-sufficient fifty years ago, exporting a net of 1.3 million tons of food a year, by the 1980s was *importing* 10 million tons a year. Can you imagine what it is now?

The basis of all developed economies over the course of history is the ability to produce a surplus of food, so that people can specialize in non-farm activities such as artisans, administrators, soldiers, artists and engineers. Until a nation can do that, all its people are tied to the soil.

There are some hopeful signs among the poor, like the microlending programs that warranted this year’s Nobel Peace Prize. Yet while they help the poor, they have not yet reached the very poor whose position is so much more intractable. Which is where our God enjoins us to come to the aid.

What is staggering about this text is the paradox that when we who have so much give sacrificially to those who have so little we, as they, are restored to the fullness of life that our souls crave.

“If you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be as the noonday” (Isaiah 58:10).

I have never been hungry, not with the sort of gnawing, relentless hunger that stiff-arms any other thought. In one respect, I wish I had, so that I might be able to identify with the plight of one half of earth’s family, my extended human family—my brothers and sisters. The experience of hunger is so alien to our experience. If they came to our door we would not turn them away. But they cannot. So God speaks this word to us on their behalf.

“Feed my people. Feed your brothers and sisters. Feed them through the church’s Congo and Haiti medical missions. Feed them through your special gifts. But somehow, find a way to feed them.” Amen