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A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF WORLD HUNGER

BY
J. O. UMOH

Abstract

The study takes an analytical look at the worsening world food crisis, in terms of causes and effects. Stressing the devastating effect of inequitable distribution of material resources, it dismisses the simplistic assumption that world food crisis is caused by over population. The negative impact of the food crisis on developmental efforts of the nations is further stressed.

In order to forestall or, at worst, reduce future crisis, strategies proposed include: Re-enforcing the prominent role of the United Nations, improving the production capacity of developing nations as well as encouraging self dependency and human resource development. (International Journal of Social Science and Public Policy 2000:3(1) pp 187-195).

INTRODUCTION

The signals have been clear - for years scientists have warned of exploding population and dwindling resources. Suddenly they can no longer be ignored. Hunger threatens our planet - not at some vague indeterminate date, but now; not in some remote underdeveloped country, but everywhere on this crowded globe. In Bangladesh, in Biafra, in the slums of Calcutta and Rio, and in many US cities as well, children are growing up crippled in mind and body by malnutrition. (Jules Archer. 1977).

Jules Archer (1977) made the above editorial comment in his book, Hunger on Planet Earth, as an insightful study on mankind's gravest crisis - the crisis of world hunger and starvation. It is only one of many profound studies conducted in the last three and a half decades by scholars who are conscientiously concerned with the sudden rise in world population, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia with an annual growth rate of 3.1 % per year and 2.2 % per year respectively (World Bank, 1993); the inverse decrease in material output, for example, in Sub-Saharan Africa economic growth in recent times has lagged behind population growth (World Bank, 1996); the high incidence of malnutrition among, at least, two-thirds of mankind, especially in the same region where real per capita consumption fell in twenty-three out of forty-one countries between 1988 - 1992 (World Bank 1996), the many factors contributing to world hunger, its frightening implications now and in the future, and the new courses and possibilities that may be our hope for the future. The global situation has changed little since Archer's publication three decades ago.

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Of the two worldwide concerns of the moment - death by starvation and death by nuclear warfare - death by starvation appears to be the most chronic and destructive. The topic of hunger, particularly, is one of worldwide concerns as mankind is becoming more and more aware that the greatest problem is not dwindling land mass but man's devastation of the environment and misuse of resources. This has led to an unprecedented concern over what scientists have come to call the 'carrying capacity' of the universe.

Lowell Summer (in Erhlich, 1968) has noted with amazing expertise that the human population explosion and declining spiral of natural resources are the greatest threats of all. Then with concern, he calls out as by prophetic vision that the time is ripe, even dangerously over-ripe, to construct a new survival strategy as far as population control is concerned. We shall have to face up or ultimately perish, and what a dreary, stupid, unlovely way to perish, on a ruined globe stripped of its primeval beauty. Certainly, what Lowell here refers to as the cause of mankind's perishing is not population growth per se but the resultant lack of food to sustain the masses which leads to hunger, starvation, and finally, death.

This paper is an attempt at arousing our consciousness to this dreadful reality by tracing, even if briefly, the problem of world hunger as it impacts on the human society in general and the specific area of development under the following subtitles: The Current global situation; Causes, general and specific, of world hunger; The effects of world hunger; The role of the UN; and proposed solutions to the problem.

The Current Situation

The population of the world is estimated to be about 6.2 billion, and to be growing at the rate of 1.7 per cent per year. This means that in about 30 years, this number will be doubled, so that if the present estimated growth rate continues, the world will have about 7.2 billion people by the year 2020. What a rapid increase, compared to the 8 million of about 8000 B.C. The most striking thing about these statistics is that the present 6.2 billion or the projected 7.2 billion by the year 2020 will still be living and sharing the same piece of land (the universe) that once was shared between 8 million some centuries back. Many in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere are hungry, and a frightening number are starving, because food production has lagged behind demand in virtually every geographic region except North America (Weeks, 1981:4 ; World Bank, 1996).

However, modern industrialization and agricultural technology have fortunately led to increased production to meet the nutritional needs of the masses. But the big issue is: How much or to what degree has the increased production and resources met the rising needs of the actual world population? Mr. McPherson, one time Administrator for the Agency of International Development, had this to say on "World Food Day", in October 1981: That despite increasing world food production, more than 800 million people are seriously undernourished. Empirical evidence reveals that very little has changed even in the 1990's as observers have concluded that economic reforms advocated by World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have failed, damaging even more the well-being of the poor (World Bank, 1996). Half of these hungry people are children less than five years old who will bear all their lives the physical and mental scars of this early deprivation.

Scientific observation have proven that after some hundreds of thousands of years, two-thirds of the world's population live in a permanent state of hunger (Weeks 1981:4 ; World Bank 1996:81). About 1.5 billion human beings can still not find the means of escaping this most terrible affliction of society. Analysts then ask with desperation: Is it possible to consider as a phenomenon inherent to life itself, a natural and inevitable contingency like death, or should it be regarded as a social evil, a plague of man's own making? The human waste resulting from hunger is considerably greater than that from wars and epidemics put together.

Speaking in the context of the Third World food situation, William W. Murdoch (1981) makes the observation that famines are by no means the major hunger problem in the world. When acute famine - strongly tied to natural disasters - disappears, chronic hunger and malnutrition remain the daily lot of hundreds of millions of people throughout the Third World, taking a persistent toll in wretched lives and appalling death rates.

This is not to claim that poverty and hunger are problems to Third World nations only. In the United States of America, for instance, about 14 million people, mostly children, live in poverty (US Vice Presidential Campaign address, November 15, 1999) while globally, 52 million people in 35 countries are poor. What is more disturbing is that incidents of these calamities as revealed by population studies are higher in the Third World than in other parts of the globe. Typical examples of wretchedness and nutritional deprivation can be cited from almost all Third World nations. In Calcutta, for example, where one out of five of its residents - 600,000 people - live, eat, and sleep in the streets, lying on the ground like bundles of rags, it has been observed that women huddle over piles of animal manure, patting it into cakes for fuel, while children compete with dogs for garbage. Those who survive grow into ragged skeletons, barefoot, hollow-eyed, and apathetic (Archer, 1977:24). Here in Nigeria, 64% of the 100 million population live in poverty, while over 48% live below the poverty line (Oluseto Ogunmakin, the Punch, Nov., 29, 1999:31).

A study by Douglas (1981) has clearly documented that the great issue of our age is not the Iron Curtain or the Bamboo Screen - Communism - but rather the hunger and poverty, made dramatically apparent by the enormous and constantly widening gap separating the 450 million well-nourished inhabitants of the world from the 1.3 billion who are malnourished because they lack the minimum human needs, including access to production resources. The various perspectives expressed about humankind and hunger, all cast a gloomy look and false hope for the future. Why this unfortunate situation, one might ask?

Causes of World Hunger

Evidently, whenever the problem of world hunger is mentioned, the first reaction, emotional or physical, is to point an accusing finger at one of the demographic traits - over population or population bomb as it is now called. This is an unfortunate association. Attempts by experts (de Castro, 1952) have shown, contrary to popular belief, that it is hunger that causes over population, not vice versa. Let us suspend de Castro's argument for now. Rather, we shall attempt to demonstrate that over population alone must not bear the whole blame for world hunger, even if it may be the factor most qualified.

As even the most elementary analysis would reveal, the causes of hunger in the world are complex and have economic, political, social and cultural dimensions. The alleviation of hunger is equally complex, involving not only increased food production, but higher incomes and better nutrition, health and other needs. Population growth and resource management are also partly, hunger's equation. It is not difficult to understand why and how over population can be responsible for world hunger. It is a question of re-examining with greater commitment what Malthus had predicted some one hundred and twenty-eight years ago - the increasing imbalance between population and production resulting from the geometrical growth in population over against the arithmetical growth in production (Malthus, 1872).

Without going into any unnecessary details, sub-Saharan Africa is a case in point. It has the highest yearly rate of natural population growth of any developing region, averaging 3.1 per cent (World Bank, 1996). That growth is expected to continue, from the look of things, because the factors encouraging high fertility have not changed significantly. Such factors include low literacy rate, cultural endorsement of polygamy and the desire to achieve economics of scale through increasing population densities, early marriages, and even religious legislation, like the muslim Sharia laws which emphasize multiple wives. Africa is also the only region in the world where per capita income and food production have declined very rapidly over the past 20 years (World Bank, 1990; 1993).

Another factor singled out for its contribution to persisting world hunger is the lack of money to buy or grow food items, and the difficulty of storing and transporting them. Murdoch (1981:7) has addressed this issue by stating that the first point to get straight about wide-spread hunger is that the causes are not physical, scientific or technical. Food production, he says, in virtually every poor country is great enough to provide an adequate diet for everyone, if it was distributed evenly within the country. Poor people go hungry precisely because they are too poor to buy the food that is available. Also important is Murdoch's observation that India, for example, has been exporting food even while millions of her population are underfed (Murdoch, 1981). This is typical of many Third World nations.

The problem of unequal distribution within the individual countries has been painfully documented by many a demographer. One of the important conclusions that Ensminger reached after a comprehensive study on food, hunger, poverty and population issues among the nations was that food to feed the hungry is not so much a production problem as much as a problem of gross inequalities in distribution in the developing countries. Hunger has its roots in poverty. People are poor because they are denied either access to production resources or opportunities to work and earn enough to meet basic human needs (Ensminger, 1981).

Still on the important question of unequal distribution of material resources, de Castro made an insightful study of some communities in Asia. It is true, he said, that Asia is a land of contrasts, and these contrasts are even more violent in the human than in the geographical sense. The distance that separates a parish of the lowest caste - untouchable, dispossessed of all human and property rights - from a maharajah in his indescribable wealth and power is far greater than that between the Himalayan peaks and the deepest point in the pacific ocean. There is an equally striking difference between the menu of a high Chinese dignitary's feast day banquet and the daily

diet of a simple peasant (de Castro, 144). This is the big issue with most so-called poor nations - the death from hunger of millions in the midst of plenty. Some people, like Ensminger, tend to attribute these disparities to the continuing effect of the creation of colonial empires, an important point in world system core-periphery analysis.

Another important contributor to the persistence of hunger especially in Third World nations, are the lasting effects which colonial regimes have left on these nations. One good example, and this can be said to be true of most of the Third World nations, is the case of India on which de Castro has followed up with a profound study. There is no questioning that by the time the British arrived in India in the eighteenth century, the inequalities of Indian life were already well developed, but the British must accept responsibility for their preservation. They administered India, interested in maximum profits, without romantic pre-occupations about the native life. In the words of de Castro:

It is no longer denied that English colonization in the tropics has always been merely a matter of administration, but it is still debated whether Britain's extreme mercantilism has ever been of any profit to the people under her dominion. Impartial analysis indicates that colonization conferred more evil and suffering on the Indians than it did advantages... It was the intervention of the English with their insatiably greedy traders that violently cut short India's revolution and forced the country back to a medieval economy and into permanent starvation (de Castro, 184).

Even after colonialism declined in most countries, an immediate power vacuum occurred within the new independent nations. Filling this power vacuum were the elite groups, whose objectives were very much patterned after the colonial model of control of the countries' finances, minerals, land and water for self-enrichment. This resulted in the poor being denied equal access to the countries' development resources, while they continued to be exploited for the betterment of those who control the resources. Closely allied to this is the problem of neo-colonialism. The colonial masters are gone in principle but their negative influence is still very heavily felt, especially in the economic sub-sector. Africa is known to be very richly endowed with natural resources. But where the means of production in one country is owned and operated by the citizens of another, the material proceeds are purposefully channeled in the interest of the latter. This sad situation is easily observed in relation to the oil industries in Nigeria. In other words, unless developing nations are able to exercise direct political control over their material resources, foreign investment will result in the continued impoverishment of the Africans.

The recent "natural" famines in the African Sahel, south of the Sahara, were largely caused by French colonialism, which impoverished both nomads and peasants, destroyed age-old economic relations between them, and forcibly began the conversion from subsistence to export agriculture. And this has continued - the production of export crops in the Sahel increased rapidly throughout the famine, even as food production was falling and people were starving. The multinationals are now showing just how productive of vegetables and other export crops the area can be. None of these products, of course, will be eaten by Africans.

If rural poverty is the key to the plight of the Third World, one must ask why such governments persist in creating and reinforcing the distortions that sustain it. The answer is simply

that, while the vast majority suffers from such policies, the elite derive great economic and political gain from urban-based development. The UN is the most legitimate authority to handle the fate of victims in this regard. How far has it gone in this regard?

The Role of The UN

In an effort to salvage the situation and to do something concrete about world hunger problem, an International Institute of Agriculture was created in the early part of last century, with offices in Rome. As a result of poor performance, its duty was taken over by the newly formed United Nations in 1945 and transformed into the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Accordingly, the United Nations (UN) was charged with a specific function: On December, 17, 1973, the UN called a World Food Conference whose task would be "to develop ways and means whereby the international community as a whole could take specific action to resolve the world food problem".

With delegates from all over the world, the UN estimated that 460 million people were going to bed hungry every night, half of them children. Addressing the opening session of the November 5, 1974 emergency meeting in Rome, the American Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger declared, "Today, we must proclaim a bold objective, that within a decade, no child will go to bed hungry, that no family will fear for its next day's bread, and that no human being's future and capacities will be stunted by malnutrition" (Archer, 1977). This well-worded declaration never materialized, or at least, not as it was intended by Kissinger at the time, judged from the situation today, as it soon becomes increasingly clear that the wealthier nations, with inflation at home and food reserves at a low ebb, are constantly seeking to substitute rhetoric for action to meet the immediate emergency.

One concrete suggestion by the UN was that the countries of the OPEC should shoulder a major responsibility in this regard since their profiteering had robbed the poorer nations of badly needed fertilizer. Ways must be found to move more of the surplus oil revenues into long-term lending or grants to poorer countries, Kissinger said. The UN has repeatedly pleaded with countries - rich countries, that is - to curb their food consumption to make for a wider distribution of the already limited resources. This appeal still seems to fall on deaf ears. Americans in particular, the greatest consumers of the world's Resources, resent being blamed for world hunger. A California study released in January, 1975 showed that Americans waste almost \$5 billion worth of food each year in spoiled meat, fruit and vegetables by carelessly buying too much at a time. However, America contributes most in volume.

Furthermore, the UN has always been on the alert to send food relief to disaster areas, like it did through FAO in 1972 when Upper Volta experienced an outbreak of cholera and measles. There are innumerable instances in which the UN is taking similar positive steps currently in crisis situations world-wide. Unfortunately, oftentimes, these shipments fall into the wrong hands and the relief effort becomes bogged down in local mismanagement and corruption. Yet the UN has not relented its efforts of promoting a more adequate distribution of foodstuffs, and of laying down the lines of a world nutritional policy.

During the war, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency furnished foreign countries with some 60 billion dollars worth of consumer goods, principally food (de Castro, 1952). Also in recognition of the economic role of women and their roles in food production in developing nations, the United Nations' Food Conference in Rome in 1974, called on all governments to involve women fully in the decision-making machinery for food production and nutrition policies as part of a total development policy. The UN certainly has laid down the policy, but how far the policy is adhered to, is a question to be faced by individual nations.

Coming closer home, Nigeria has been quite conscious of the precarious situation of food scarcity and its negative impact on national development. Accordingly, government has from time to time put in place some policies and programmes to increase food production. In the area of policy, the emphasis has been in the restructuring of the marketing board system, the use of various price incentives and input policies as well as increases in the use of farm inputs to promote production. In the area of programmes, the following can be identified: The National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPP), the Agricultural Development Project (ADP), the Livestock Development Programme, the Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), the Green Revolution, the Directorate for Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) and the Agricultural Development Program (Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Information Bulletin, 1984; Socio-Economic Profile of Nigeria, 1996:69-77).

Like the pathetic situation which one observes on the international level, these programmes have not generated the desired results of food for all by the year 2000 partly for lack of good will to implement the programmes, partly due to poor financial management at various government levels and partly due to poor coordination between food production and distribution. Food insecurity has been the fate of Nigeria even as we begin the journey into the 21st century.

Proposed Lines of Action For The Future

The following suggestions may not be entirely new, but pertinent for reconsideration. In view of the possible danger and the damaging effects of hunger, the need for 'a' concrete solution becomes all the more urgent. So long as hunger and disease are the rule, economic and social development cannot take place, and millions of people will continue to live in poverty, deprived of basic human needs and dignity. Dissatisfaction and unhappiness, which are the immediate results of hunger, are often the basic causes of upheavals in many countries. Among the many possibilities for checking and controlling world hunger, it would seem that the most important thing is to control the number of persons that share the resources that we have - they are limited. Overpopulation is the most serious threat to the whole future of our race. There can be no meaningful conservation policy without having a population policy geared towards fertility reduction.

There must be in addition, an improvement in the production capacity of the developing nations. In many of the developing countries, significant increases in agricultural productivity can be made only through new knowledge and improved technology that permit higher output per unit of limited resources.

Two major obstacles, however, to possible growth in the agricultural sector in developing nations are political instability and crushing International Debt burdens. It is obvious that where governments have to spend a great proportion of their material energy in maintaining itself in power, little or nothing may be left for the solution of other pressing problems like that of hunger. The same is true of international debt. Where emphasis is placed on debt reduction, there is a corresponding neglect of internal responsibility. Here, the developed nations could help by either cancelling or considerably reducing the debts of poor developing nations in order to allow the latter to face up to other challenging domestic issues like the provision of food for the masses. Of equal importance is the improvement of human resources. While plans are conceived in material, economic and social terms, their achievement necessitates that all development be accepted as being first and foremost, human resource development. Only as people become more self-reliant and self-respecting will the material and economic components of development be achieved. In some places, the general hunger crisis is less technological than socio-political; it is not much the means that are lacking as the ability to apply them. Very importantly, poverty alleviation programme must be based on the correct identification of the poor and their primary needs. Government policies and programmes must of necessity be people-oriented in order not to be self-defeating.

In the long run, the long-term answer rests with the developing countries - they must meet their own food needs. And they can; the Third World contains more than 70% of the world's arable land. New ways have to be sought of treating domestic plants and animals and food producing machines, the output of which can be increased in quantity and quality. Another effective way to grow more food is to expand agriculture by farming new lands and new kinds of soil, and by introducing new plants and animals for food purposes along with the improvement of the storage system, process, and the mechanization of agriculture (Leakey and Wills, 1977). Of course, more food, in both quantity and quality, will only ease but not solve problems associated with development programmes. If people cannot afford it, all the food in the world will do them little good. Therefore intensive studies are necessary that will identify effective ways and means of ensuring food security to benefit the poor. Finally, the problem of the much dreaded AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) and other diseases, like malaria and their capacity to drastically reduce the work force has to be tackled with urgency in order not to neutralise any effective strategies for greater food production.

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