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Book Review


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The issue of hunger and the hungry has been part of the development problematique in developing countries, particularly in Africa. There tends to be in some literature an association between a country's level of socio-economic and political development and its ability to resist the vagaries of nature such as drought, which consequently leads to hunger. Part of this literature points to Africa's inability to successfully embrace modernization - modern farming, harvesting and storage techniques, an inability that then becomes part of the build up of hunger-prone situations.

A second set of literature explains the frequent incidence of hunger in Africa as a consequence of the colonial interlude, the institution of Western capitalism and the continued persistence of neo-colonial institutions, which continue to breed poverty and underdevelopment in Africa. Africa before the colonial interlude, this literature argues, had well-coordinated farming systems which produced enough food for consumption at home and for the market. The disorganization that was associated with colonial agriculture is then seen as the genesis of the present agrarian crisis.

Whatever the arguments, the question of hunger in Africa and most of the developing world, is no longer just a socio-economic, political, regional or national issue, it has
become a global moral question. Thanks to the process of globalization and advances made in technology, there have been remarkable improvements, not only of the systems of producing food, but also in the manner in which the food is stored to last, up to the time of need. Globalization however, has also occasioned the exclusion of many more people from their means of livelihoods, making them more and more vulnerable to hunger and disease in a world that has the technological capacity to produce food in plenty and to deliver it to starving populations, spread across national and regional borders. This is what raises the issue of hunger to a moral dimension.

The book under review, *Who's Hungry? and How do we Know?* is an earnest attempt to confront this moral dilemma by presenting an analytical picture of who the hungry are and how they can be identified at regional, household and individual levels. The book is divided into seven chapters, each chapter complementing information from the previous one hence, establishing an encouraging continuity in reading.

Chapter one attempts to provide a framework for analyzing hunger which manifests itself at three levels. First, is the level of *food shortage* occasioned by production shortfalls on a regional level. Second, is the situation of *food poverty*, which is due to inadequate food availability within the household; and lastly, *food deprivation*, which is a consequence of production difficulties and distribution inequities, and which at an individual level leads to malnutrition. The linkages between these different levels of *hunger* and their effects at regional, household, and individual levels are explained. The causal structure of hunger provided on page three does not however, delve into the wider macro-determinants of hunger in Africa. National disasters, wars and social disruption are historically presented as the root causes of hunger at a micro-level. A political economy explanation of hunger, which goes beyond identifying the hungry and where they are and which then goes on to explain why they are hungry, is critically necessary. Yet, this is lacking.

Chapter two provides a detailed review and discussion on methods of measuring hunger. Input measures are discussed showing what people are eating and how much at national, household, and individual levels. Household surveys showing expenditure for food and food consumption are shown as important direct input measures of hunger or its absence. Indirect input measures discussed include national nutritional output measures and the measurement of nutritional status through anthropometric indicators.

Chapters three, four and five form the critical part of this text. They discuss in detail the three levels of identifying the hungry - food shortage, food poverty, and food deprivation, in that order. In chapter three, global, regional and country level aspects of food shortages, their causes, and the relationship between drought and famine are contextually analyzed. Although there is a frank discussion of the importance of aid to underwrite the effects of drought and thereby avoid hunger, the ideological conditionalities that underlie food aid and which in most cases lead to hunger and deaths in situations of plenty, have not been delved into. At least, this is one lesson learnt from the 1983-1986 famine in Ethiopia,
where the United States used food aid to dismantle the socialist regime. The admission by
the authors of the primacy of politics more than weather in inducing hunger is limited to
the nation-state, which excludes international politics from taking its share of moral
responsibility. Both Chapters four and five share in the same tune of arguments, focusing
on second-degree causes of food poverty and food deprivation, such as social
displacement, and macro-economic policies, such as the structural adjustment
programmes (SAPs), entitlement failure of households (i.e., failure to access land and
other productive resources) and flawed government policies. This presentation is well
articulated but not critically conceptualized within the historical circumstances. Macro-
economic policies did not just spontaneously appear on the scene. How, then, does one
explain the fact that the implementation of SAPs in the agricultural sector has accentuated
the number of people prone to hunger and hunger situations? There is also a bit of
generalization in the presentation of hunger without clear demarcations of its occurrence
along the lines of class, geography and gender, save for a few dichotomizations in Chapter
five.

A critical reflection on the situation of hunger in Africa and the rest of the developing
world may need to deal with the changes in agricultural policy during the colonial and
immediate post-independence periods which had a bias towards cash crops. The argument
then was that food crops, such as millet and cassava, cannot provide foreign exchange
earnings that a country needs for development. The over-concentration on cash crop
farming entailed changes in the demographic structure, with more labour force in cash-
crop farming, but without the adequate cash compensation for buying food. These changes
led to a reduction in the acreage under food crop cultivation, and high dependence on
starchy foods which subject the population to malnutrition. Indeed, the African agrarian
crisis of the 1980s and 1990s is a cumulative outcome of these agricultural policies of the
1960s to 1980s. Part of the reason why hunger was persisted in the 1990s was the collapse
of the traditional export crop markets (tea and coffee), such that farmers were forced to
sell their food crops to offset the reduction of their purchasing power. Thus, insufficient
food is retained for consumption. Farmers then have to purchase food at higher prices,
which most of them cannot afford. Even after the collapse of the market in cash crops,
multinationals and foreign agribusiness consortiums have encouraged African farmers to
move into fruit, vegetable and flower farming for the European leisure industry, while
keeping hunger in Africa a growing business for international NGOs and businessmen.

The discussion on food shortages related to conflicts in Chapter six, is afflicted with the
same lack of broad analysis inherent in the previous chapters. Whereas it is true that local
conflicts over entitlements to land, food, and water are commonplace, the most persistent
conflicts in Africa have an international dimension, which has been responsible for large-
scale hunger and deaths in Africa. The conflicts are often ignited by international arms
dealers interested in exploiting African resources, such as minerals. The conflicts in Sierra
Leone, Angola, and The Congo attest to this. The same conflicts, once they cause
displacement and hunger, create business for "Western humanitarian" operators. It is not,
therefore, realistic to localize hunger and hunger-related causes simplistically, as the authors have done in this book.

Another glaring omission by the authors is in the manner they have scantily discussed the politics of food aid. International instruments that bind countries to give food to the needy. The practice of giving food aid unequally has not been examined, yet it is a real contemporary concern. Increasingly, the West's response to alleviate food shortages in other parts of the world is being dictated to by geography, biased media coverage, and political interests, not actual need. New statistics given by Oxfam, in a recent report, show that Africa and ACP countries have always been discriminated against in food aid. According to the statistics, when the UN made a food appeal for the people of Yugoslavia in 1999, the response from the West represented US$207 for every person in need, for Sierra Leone, the response equalled US$16 and for the Democratic Republic of Congo, the response equalled US$8 for every person in need. The authors have not made any attempt to critically analyze these injustices in the distribution of food aid. on the contrary, they create a perception that Africans do not try to overcome their adversity.

The authors should, however, be commended for bringing under one cover all the information about who the hungry are and how to identify them. As a matter of fact, this information is not new. The hungry have been brought right into our sitting rooms through the television screens. Our interest and concern should instead be, why the phenomenon of hunger persists in an age when the world boasts of the knowledge economy. This is the challenge.

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