

Celebrating World Food Day—In 2020?

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Sadly, World Food Day always presents an opportunity for hand-wringing—and this year is no different. Today, as on the previous 20 World Food Days, hundreds of millions of people remain hungry. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, 840 million people are chronically undernourished. Despite summits and goals and rhetoric, progress is tragically slow. This number has declined by 2.5 million per year over the 1990s. The FAO reports that we are on track to reach the World Food Summit goal of halving the number of hungry and chronically malnourished people in 2115—one hundred years, and five generations, late.

To be sure, sincere efforts are taking place in many places and at many levels. Major summits have been held on food, sustainable development, and development goals for the new millennium. Exciting regional initiatives, like the New Partnership for Africa's Development, are underway. Some donors, like the Canadian International Development Agency and the U.S. Agency for International Development, are making important new investments in Africa. The Gates Foundation is leading innovation in nutrition-related philanthropy. These pockets of activity offer real promise for improving the well-being of poor and hungry people in developing countries.

So why is progress so slow? Are we taking the wrong actions, or just failing to take enough action at all?

In fact, we know quite a lot about the causes of hunger—and how to tackle them. We also know a lot about what not to do—distort pro-poor markets with costly subsidies, for example—and yet we keep doing it. It is easy, however, to focus on diagnoses without paying enough attention to implementing action and to supporting all of the actors involved. It is also easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the need and the multitude of actions that ought to be taken.

Where national governments are committed to achieving food security, there is clearly much more the international community can do in support of this goal. If I had to choose a top priority in such a case, I would pick investment in human resources: education (primary, university, mid-career) and health and nutrition, particularly of women and children. The benefits generated by education, skills, and good health lay the foundation that will allow people to permanently escape poverty and hunger.

Many will argue that investment in human resources is not enough, and of course they are right. To escape poverty, people also need access to jobs, markets, roads, seeds, good governance, and other resources. Nonetheless education and health services will place them in a better position to acquire and use all of these resources.

Given how far we are from accomplishing the World Food Summit goal, we need to begin taking more bold, innovative, and effective action, while strengthening people's capacity to act for themselves and for others in their communities. We may also be forced

to make hard decisions about priorities. With committed action on the part of enough institutions and individuals, World Food Day could even become an occasion for celebrating the world's achievements in improving the lives of the Earth's people instead of bemoaning the meager progress. Wouldn't that be a reason to celebrate?