

Listen to the Starving

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When the world's leaders gather in New York for the World Summit tomorrow, they will be subjected to a barrage of special pleading and advocacy. But the voice they probably will not hear is the most important one: that of the poor and hungry struggling to raise and feed their families on a parched patch of land in the developing world.

They are among more than 850 million chronically hungry people worldwide. And their plight is what it is really all about. Can we continue to live with the scandal of great wealth and conspicuous consumption coexisting with misery, malnutrition and early death? Can we really be surprised if such injustice produces a lost generation bent on violence and destruction?

The presidents and prime ministers coming to the summit will be reviewing progress toward achieving the eight Millennium Development Goals agreed to five years ago. The first is the reduction of the incidence of extreme hunger and poverty. It is the critical one, because unless it is achieved, the others will fail too.

Hunger and poverty are inextricably linked: hunger is not only the most obvious manifestation of poverty, but also one of its principle causes. There is a vicious spiral at work that condemns millions and millions of our fellow citizens to short, stunted, unfulfilled lives.

The key battleground in the fight to eradicate hunger and poverty is the countryside. After all, three quarters of the 1.1 billion people living on less than a dollar a day live in the rural areas of developing countries and depend on agriculture for their survival.

The logic is therefore inescapable: invest in agriculture and rural infrastructure. It is inconceivable that progress can be achieved without renewing the global commitment to agriculture and the rural economies of poor countries.

Yet, over the past 20 years, official development assistance going to these sectors in the poorest countries has been cut by more than half, from \$5.14 billion (U.S.) to \$2.22 billion. The numbers speak for themselves.

Despite this, more than 30 developing countries, with a total population exceeding 2.2 billion people, have succeeded in reducing the numbers of their undernourished by more than 25 per cent. And they all achieved significantly higher growth in agricultural GDP than the developing countries as a whole.

But the success of these countries is threatened by continuing injustices in the world trading system. With industrialized countries supporting their agriculture to the tune of nearly \$1 billion U.S. a day, international commodity prices are driven down and farmers in the poor countries find themselves being undercut in their own markets.

In Hong Kong in December, trade negotiators will try to find some way to address these issues. What are the most appropriate policies for ensuring food security while moving toward a more liberal trade regime? There has been much talk about level playing fields -- but there is a long way to go before we achieve such a desirable state.

Meanwhile, we continue to watch on TV and read in newspapers the plight of children dying because of drought in Niger and the Sahel region. And after the usual blaming game, we rush in food aid, at huge logistical cost. Then we wait for the next crisis, without addressing the root

causes of the problem by building the essential water control systems and rural infrastructures.

The economic cost of doing nothing about hunger is tremendous: if hunger persists at current levels, every year it will cause deaths and disability in developing countries with the related loss of productivity amounting to a staggering \$50 billion.

The human cost is appalling too; every year without progress costs five million children their lives.

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