

# Introduction

Early in 2015, I heard from a Roman Catholic priest I had interviewed the year before during a reporting assignment in South Sudan for *National Catholic Reporter*. He told me that some of those he knew who had fled during political violence had died of hunger. When I heard this, my heart sank. Crises like those in South Sudan often cause food and food assistance to be cut off. But it also drives people from their productive lands, so they can't feed themselves—food is something a lot of people generate and produce, not just something they receive during emergencies. Whatever the cause, it is nevertheless unconscionable—even during war and conflict—that people die of hunger.

It is also unconscionable to see people suffer—and there is something particularly hideous about seeing children sustain the pain caused by hunger. More than a decade ago, on an assignment for Church World Service, I visited a displacement camp in Mashlak, outside of the city of Herat, Afghanistan. There I saw large numbers of malnourished children, some of whom I knew would probably die. They had telltale signs of hunger—stunting, sunken eyes, and bloated stomachs. When you see a gaunt child with dark circles under the eyes, you never forget it.

I saw children with the same telltale signs of malnutrition during a later assignment in neighboring Pakistan where floods had ravaged the northern part of the country. In the community of Balakot, children were being treated for immediate needs and health concerns directly related to the floods, such as tuberculosis, upper respiratory ailments, and skin and eye infections. In my interviews with physicians, several raised the specter of famine as one possible fallout from the floods. That did not come to pass. Interventions made a difference. But in ignored and impoverished areas like this, where people were already vulnerable to diseases and to stunting even before the floods, it was difficult to see kids suffer. Such conditions are common throughout the world, yet are rooted in specific problems and situations. This area of rural Pakistan could claim only a single health facility for a mountainous region of 300,000 people.

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The 2010 floods affected one-fifth of Pakistan's landmass, an area about the size of Italy, disrupting the lives of 20 million people. Climate change may have played a role in the floods, and talk was common that deforested mountainsides worsened the situation—the result of illegal logging by a powerful timber mafia working in concert with militants fighting the Pakistani government. This left men, women, and children homeless and without any means of livelihood, creating a disquieting and disorienting season of the Muslim celebrations of Ramadan and Eid. “Normally Eid is a time of happiness,” one woman, Fatama, told me, “but this Eid we don't feel anything. Our every happiness was our house. It was our paradise. Now we're homeless. We don't know where to go.” And there was nothing left to eat. The disaster, said Jack Byrne, then country director in Pakistan for Catholic Relief Services, had “brought people to their knees. . . . Now people will have to get back and try to live.”

### *In Pakistan, Multiply the Problem by 20 Million*

Go back and try to live. This is life in one of the starkly poor regions of the world, a place facing many problems and challenges, and at the core of it all, the need for humans to eat, a need that is still denied to millions every day, despite progress on many fronts. Take the case of forty-eight-year-old Said Qamar, who at the time of the floods lived in a small village in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Shangla district. Ayaz Ahmad, a staffer with the Pakistan humanitarian group Help in Need, called Qamar's existence a “survival life.”

Qamar had a large family to support. He and his wife, Pareena Bibi, were raising twelve children, ages five to twenty-three—eight of their own and four nieces and nephews. Most critically, the family's century-old homestead property, which produced fruits and vegetables both for their own use and as a source of income, was leveled by a landslide of water and mud, rocks and boulders. The land was shockingly still, smothered by all of nature's heavy debris.

Qamar spoke little when I met him but admitted to still being traumatized by the events. He was contemplating whether to salvage his land—which once bore the riches of apricots and bananas, melons and peaches, potatoes and chilies—or to move to one of Pakistan's

urban centers to begin life anew. Qamar needed to find, and quickly, a way to support his family. With “no alternatives for livelihood,” staffer Ahmed said, “He has a big responsibility. It’s too difficult to rehabilitate the land. It will take too much time.” Changing a life at the age of nearly fifty, Ahmed continued, would not be easy and would require patience and time, especially for one whose family had been farming for a hundred years on the same plot of land.

Multiply that problem by 20 million, and you have some idea of the dilemma Pakistan faced. Wajahat Latif, a senior program advisor to Church World Service in Pakistan, said, “I think the fabric of this society is going to be stretched very, very thin.”



Stretched thin. Peeled like an onion. Pick your metaphor. Jack Byrne spoke of the many “layers and layers” of issues here, and the need for those outside of Pakistan not to “stop and pull away from the disaster.” Those two ideas are important to keep in mind. So many issues, as we will see, are connected to hunger: land rights, climate, gender. In places like Pakistan (or Uganda, or Bolivia) they radiate out from a core: the inability of systems in many places around the world to provide sufficient food for a sustainable and dignified life.

The fault of such systems is always on display during serious emergencies. A veteran humanitarian worker I spoke to in Pakistan told me that, given the scale, the 2010 floods presented the most serious challenge to Pakistan since the 1947 partition with India. “The Pakistan nation does not exist now,” he said. “It’s in pieces. It’s looking for a viable system.” Five years later and counting, Pakistan still exists—and is still recovering, yes. But the point about a viable system is still valid, as is the Pakistani humanitarian worker’s observation—so overstated that it has become a cliché of sorts, “Pakistan has nuclear weapons but doesn’t have enough electricity to light houses.” Or to properly feed its population.

Jack Byrne’s idea that we not “stop and pull away” from responding to humanitarian needs—of which stopping hunger is paramount—is part of what undergirds *Food Fight: Struggling for Justice in a Hungry World*. Antihunger advocates often say hunger can be beaten—and

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as someone who has covered emergencies throughout the world, I am convinced that that is the case. It is not God's will or hopelessly insurmountable problems that get in the way of solving the problem of hunger. These are human-caused problems, with human-based solutions. In this book, we will examine these solutions and see how good, inspired action—by churches, NGOs, bodies like the UN—is helping to feed the world. But to be even more clear: This is a book borne in part from anger: the anger of a journalist who has seen hunger throughout the world and is adding his small voice (with the help from a respected photographer) as a call to arms. It is a call to arms because of the essential nature of food. "Food is that most elementary of life forces," writes political economist A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi in his book *Hungry for Change: Farmers, Food Justice and the Agrarian Question*. "It is essential for life, yet it can bring death." It can bring death when it is denied, of course. But it can also bring death when people do not eat nutritious food—and both elements are at work, viciously, in the world today.

This speaks of a system that is nothing less than a calamity, as Akram-Lodhi rightly calls it, and it is something of "unprecedented proportions." The planet can feed itself—enough for 10 billion people. Yet almost 1 billion people per day—every day—he notes, are "chronically malnourished, and another billion are always under the imminent existential threat of not knowing for sure where their next meal is coming from."

Modern hunger, he writes,

is a historically unprecedented calamity of vicious intensity . . . every seven seconds or so a child around the world dies of hunger. That's nine children a minute, 540 children an hour, 12,960 a day; and children are only one-third of those who die from hunger every day. Imagine the reaction of the world if the World Trade Center's Twin Towers fell thrice a day, relentlessly, 365 days a year. Yet that is what is happening to the hungry children of the world; and worse still, many people know of this calamity, this "silent tsunami," in the words of the World Food Program, wring their hands and do nothing, as if nothing can be done.

Many *do* wring their hands. But there is a core of committed people who are fighting for the fairer provision of food and are struggling for a more just world—their ranks include doctors, nutritionists, academics, humanitarian workers, nuns and priests, clergy of all religious faiths, and those in poor communities themselves. Their struggles are a large part of what *Food Fight: Struggling for Justice in a Hungry World* is about. It is a book, in both text and photographs, which seeks to give a voice and a face to people living with these realities and to those who are attempting to solve these problems.

To be clear: This is a largely descriptive, not prescriptive, book. It is far from a definitive work; its focus is modest: an attempt by two humanitarian journalists who work in the religious media to cast a light on a problem that does not get the attention it deserves. It does try to place what we have seen in a certain context, and to examine the ways in which the global food system—and it is global—might be reformed. And though this book is written out of real anger, it is grounded in cautious hope. Some fine, solid progress has been made in the fight against hunger in the past two decades—and that progress is to be applauded and honored, but much has yet to be done. Having, in two previous books, explored the issue of hunger as part of the realities of Darfur and Haiti, Paul Jeffrey and I decided to examine hunger in a more focused way to complete a humanitarian trilogy of sorts. Hunger and its attendant problems have been a constant theme in our work—it has trailed us on assignments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—and in the United States, where nearly 49 million Americans struggle daily to put food on the table.

*“The Hungry Ask Us for Dignity, Not for Charity”*

The world that is well fed and doesn't have to give food much thought—except to enjoy it—needs reminding of this, and those of us who work for agencies trying to end hunger and malnutrition can be thankful that we do have allies in this fight. Pope Francis is one such ally. In a 2014 address at the Food and Agricultural Organization in Rome, an event lauded as the century's first major conference on nutrition, the pontiff said that “the hungry ask us for dignity, not for charity,” and warned against the lack of solidarity in the world—the

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kind of solidarity that could make a difference. Solidarity, he said, “is the attitude that makes people capable of reaching out to others and basing their mutual relations on this sense of brotherhood that overcomes differences and limits, and inspires us to seek the common good together.” The pontiff added: “Human beings, as they become aware of being partly responsible for the plan of creation, become capable of mutual respect, instead of fighting between themselves, damaging and impoverishing the planet.”

This is a basic and fundamental truism that deserves our attention, and is the undergirding principle of this book as we narrate the stories of individuals, families, and communities who are not numbers, but brothers and sisters worthy of love and respect. All of us must eat, but the chance to eat well, or even at all, is still denied to much of humanity, which is why the fight for food, the struggle for justice, continues. It is a food fight, all right. A fight to see that simple dignity is denied to no one.