Measured globally, there is more than enough to feed everyone. Considering only grain, enough is produced to provide everyone with ample protein and more than 3000 calories a day, about the caloric intake of the average American. (A third or more of this grain is now fed to livestock.) And this 3000 calorie estimate does not include many other foods—beans, root crops, fruits, nuts, vegetables, and grass-fed meats.¹

But global estimates mean little except to dispel the widespread notion that we have reached the earth’s limits. What really explodes the myth that scarcity is the cause of hunger is the fact that enough food is being produced even in countries where so many are forced to go hungry.

In India, while millions starve, soldiers patrol the government’s 16 million tons of “surplus” grain.² In the Sahelian countries of West Africa even during the much-publicized drought and famine of the early seventies, surveys by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, squelched by displeased aid-seeking governments, documented that each Sahelian country, with the possible exception of mineral-rich Mauritania, actually produced enough grain to feed its total population.³ In Mexico, where at least 80 percent of the children in the rural areas are undernourished, livestock (much of it raised for export to the United States) consume more basic grains than the country’s entire rural population.⁴

In Bangladesh, one of the world’s most densely populated countries, enough grain is produced to provide, theoretically, each person with more than 2600 calories a day.⁵ Yet over half the families in Bangladesh daily consume less than 1500 calories per person, the bare minimum necessary.⁶ Following the 1974 floods, millions in Bangladesh perished. But they did not die because of scarcity. One Bangladeshi describes what happened in her village: “A lot of people died of starvation here. The rich farmers were holding rice and not letting any of the poor peasants see . . .” Asked whether there was enough food in the village, she replied, “There may not have been a lot of food, but if it had been shared, no one would have died.”⁷

Nor should we ever forget that in the United States millions have not enough to eat. Who would argue it is because there is not enough food produced?

Hunger is real; scarcity is not.

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Cattle Drawn cart on north-south highway in Brazil. World Bank photo by Tomas Sennett.

MYTH TWO

Hunger results from overpopulation: There are just too many people for food-producing resources to sustain.

If “too many people” caused hunger, we would expect to find the most hunger in countries having the most people for each cropped acre. Yet we find no such pattern. Compare China and India, for example. China has merely half the cultivated acreage for each person that India has.⁸ Yet in only 20 years the Chinese people succeeded in eliminating visible hunger while so many Indians still go hungry.

We also find countries with comparatively large amounts of agricultural land per person that, even so, have some of the most
severe and chronic hunger in the world. While severe hunger is a daily reality for most Bolivians, their country has well over one-half acre of cultivable land per person, significantly more than in France, and potentially ten cultivable acres per person. Brazil has more cultivated acreage per person than the United States, yet in recent years the percent of the people undernourished has increased from 45 percent to 72 percent. Mexico, where most of the rural population suffers from undernourishment, has more cultivated land per person than Cuba, where now no one goes hungry.

In Africa, south of the Sahara, where we find some of the worst and most chronic hunger in the world, there are almost two and one-half cultivated acres per person, more than in the United States or the Soviet Union and six to eight times more than in China.

Certainly there are a few countries in Latin America with both a relatively high population density and widespread hunger—countries like Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Haiti and the Dominican Republic, nonetheless, have just slightly less cultivated land per person and a much longer growing season than Italy. This calculation does not even include the considerable additional area uncultivated in these two Caribbean countries many agronomists agree is good agricultural land. This land is officially classified as "permanent pasture" simply because the well-off owners choose to graze livestock on it.

The tremendous and needless underutilization of food producing resources allows us only to conclude that so-called overpopulation is not the cause of hunger. Of all the earth's cultivable land, less than half is now being cropped. In most underdeveloped countries, average grain yields are one half what they are in the industrial countries. And much land, presently harvested only once yearly, could provide two or even more harvests. Bangladesh, for instance, has excellent conditions for rice cultivation—rich alluvial soils, tropical sun and abundant rainfall that could readily be controlled for irrigation. Yet most of the land is planted with rice only once a year and the average yields are only one-third of those of the industrial countries and one-sixth of those proven possible in Bangladesh.

Such underutilization of food-producing resources characterizes every society where, as in Bangladesh, land and the credit and marketing system are controlled by a few and those who work the land do not have effective control over it. The real barriers to greater production are not physical but political and economic—as we detail in our response to Myth Seven.

The fact that the myth that hunger is caused by "overpopulation" is so widespread is in itself revealing. It says a lot about how we all are conditioned to regard people. Are we not made to think of people as an economic liability when, in reality, all the wealth of any country begins with people—with human labor? The economic security of a nation depends not so much on rich natural resources as on how effectively its people can be motivated and their labor utilized.

While Americans think of the Third World in terms of excessive numbers of people swamping agriculture in search of work, the facts reveal that their labor could well be effectively used. Agriculturally successful countries like Japan have twice the number of workers per acre found in countries like India and the Philippines. According to a World Bank study, if countries like India attained Japan's level of labor intensity (two workers per hectare) their agriculture could absorb all the labor force expected by 1985. Many economists, moreover, have argued that certain countries in Africa are underpopulated in view of the sizeable labor force needed to bring into production untapped agricultural resources. In other words, people appear as a liability only in a certain kind of economic system. People are not born marginal.

"Marginal people," hunger itself, and high birth rates, all three turn out to be symptoms. They are symptoms of the same disease—the insecurity and poverty of the majority resulting from the monopolizing of productive assets by a few.

High birth rates are often people's defensive reaction to such a system: people need to have many children in order to provide laborers to augment meager family income. Many children are also needed to provide old-age security and to compensate for the high infant death rate, the result of inadequate nutrition and health care. Moreover, high birth rates can reflect the social powerlessness of women, which is exacerbated by poverty. In most cases, the greater the poverty, the greater the oppression of women. Birth rates do not fall until women gain control over reproductive decisions, a process that cannot occur in isolation from both men and women achieving economic self-determination.

No one should discount the long-term consequences of rapid population growth. High population densities can make more difficult the tasks of social and economic restructuring necessary to eliminate hunger. The error, however, is to transform the problem of population—a symptom and exacerbating factor—into the cause of hunger. This is not semantic squabble. Getting at the solution to any problem hinges on how well one can pinpoint its root cause. The root cause of hunger has to do with the relationships of people to each other and to their control over resources. As long as people think the fundamental cause is elsewhere, the hungry will in fact be made hungrier. Indeed, to attack high birth rates without attacking the causes of poverty and the powerlessness of women is fruitless. It is a tragic diversion our planet cannot afford.