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# No excuses for hunger these days

By Jack Kloppenburg

**T**oday is the 20th anniversary of World Food Day, an event intended to galvanize action to alleviate the worldwide bite of hunger.

On this day, we should ask not only about who is going hungry and why, but also about what is being eaten. And we should consider how what we eat affects not only our own health but also the health of the planet. Biotechnology casts a huge shadow over World Food Day this year, as the very nature of our food is changing radically.

In the United States, nearly 36 million people — including 14 million children — do not have enough to eat, according to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. And 800 million people in the developing world go to sleep at night hungry, according to the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization.

There is no excuse for this, since there is now plenty of food for all of us on this planet to eat well and healthfully. Each year, enough grain is produced to provide all 6 billion of us with 3,000 calories per day.

This was the argument made by Frances Moore Lappe back in 1972 in her wonderful cookbook-political essay, "Diet For A Small Planet." "The problem," she wrote, "is not scarcity of land or food . . . it is a scarcity of democracy."

As Amartya Sen, winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics, noted after studying famines: "Starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there not being enough food to eat." Hunger, asserted Sen, is not a function of how much food exists, but of "who can command what." People starve, not because there is no food, but because social norms and laws do not entitle them to obtain the food.

Now come the boosters of biotechnology, claiming they will solve world hunger by providing more food. But the deployment of transgenic crops is being guided not by need but by profit. Today, more than half of the corn and soybean crops in the United States is genetically engineered varieties. Nearly 80 percent of these grains are fed not to humans but to animals, not to feed the hungry but to stuff the sated. Our food system is organized so as to bring animal fats and proteins at the cheapest possible price to the richest people in the world, who need them the least.

The problem is not with biotechnology itself, or even transgenics. The problem — as with the availability of food — is with who can command the use of such powerful technologies. The problem is with corporate biotechnology.

Without a robust ecological science, we do not have the knowledge to use the new biotechnologies wisely. And without a participatory democratic structure for the development and deployment of the new biotechnologies, we do not have the civic or institutional capacity to use them justly.

Fittingly, food has begun to appear as a central node of opposition to corporate globalization. Sustainable eaters are connecting with sustainable farmers not just to oppose the conventional food system, but to actively construct an alternative.

Community Supported Agriculture, a system where families or individuals pay up-front to buy a share of a small farmer's produce, is growing. Farmers' markets are also gaining in popularity. The community-garden movement allows urban dwellers to grow their own food.

Around the world, producers' cooperatives of peasant and indigenous farmers are shipping sustainably produced bananas and coffee to retail food cooperatives in the cities of Europe and North America.

On this 20th World Food Day, we must insist not just upon the right to food, or even upon the right to healthful food, but upon the right to a democratic food system.

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