No excuses for hunger these days

By Jack Kloppenburg

Today is the 20th anniversary of World Food Day, an event intended to galvanize action to alleviate the worldwide face 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-cum-political essay, “Die 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 overall.” 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 settle them to obtain the food.

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

Kloppenburg is a rural sociologist and sustainability ecologist at UW-Madison. His column was prepared for Progressive Media Project of Madison and distributed by Knight Ridder Tribune Information Services.