

People, Not Technology, Are the Key to Ending Hunger

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The debate over biotechnology is a tragic distraction.

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Biotechnology companies and even some scientists argue that we need genetically modified seeds to feed the world and to protect the Earth from chemicals. Their arguments feel eerily familiar.

Thirty years ago, I wrote "Diet for a Small Planet" for one reason. As a researcher buried in the UC Berkeley agricultural library, I was stunned to learn that the experts--equivalent to the biotech proponents of today--were wrong. They were telling us we'd reached the Earth's limits to feed ourselves, but in fact there was more than enough food for us all.

Hunger, I learned, is the result of economic "givens" we ourselves have created, assumptions and structures that actively generate scarcity from plenty. Today this is more, not less, true.

Throughout history, ruminants had served humans by turning grasses and other "inedibles" into high-grade protein. They were our four-legged protein factories. But once we began feeding livestock from cropland that could grow edible food, we began to convert ruminants into our protein disposals. Only a small fraction of the nutrients fed to animals return to us in meat; the rest animals use largely for energy or they excrete. Thirty years ago, one-third of the world's grain was going to livestock; today it is closer to one-half. And now we're mastering the same disappearing trick with the world's fish supply. By feeding fish to fish, again, we're reducing the potential supply.

We're shrinking the world's food supply for one reason: The hundreds of millions of people who go hungry cannot create a sufficient "market demand" for the fruits of the Earth. So more and more of it flows into the mouths of livestock, which convert it into what the better-off can afford. Corn becomes filet mignon. Sardines become salmon.

Enter biotechnology. While its supporters claim that seed biotechnology methods are "safe" and "precise," other scientists strongly refute that, as they do claims that biotech crops have actually reduced pesticide use.

But this very debate is in some ways part of the problem. It is a tragic distraction our planet cannot afford.

We're still asking the wrong question. Not only is there already enough food in the world, but as long as we are only talking about food--how best to produce it--we'll never end hunger or create the communities and food safety we want.

We must ask instead: How do we build communities in tune with nature's wisdom in which no one, anywhere, has to worry about putting food--safe, healthy food--on the table? Asking this question takes us far beyond food. It takes us to the heart of democracy itself, to whose voices are heard in matters of land, seeds, credit, employment, trade and food safety.

The problem is, this question cannot be addressed by scientists or by any private entity, including even the most high-minded corporation. Only citizens can answer it, through public debate and the resulting accountable institutions that come from our engagement.

Where are the channels for public discussion and where are the accountable polities?

Increasingly, public discussion about food and hunger is framed by advertising by multinational corporations that control not only food processing and distribution but farm inputs and seed patents.

Two years ago, the seven leading biotech companies, including Monsanto, teamed up under the neutral-sounding Council for Biotechnology Information and are spending millions to, for example, blanket us with full-page newspaper ads about biotech's virtues.

Government institutions are becoming ever more beholden to these corporations than to their citizens. Nowhere is this more obvious than in decisions regarding biotechnology--whether it's the approval or patenting of biotech seeds and foods without public input or the rejection of mandatory labeling of biotech foods despite broad public demand for it.

The absence of genuine democratic dialogue and accountable government is a prime reason most people remain blind to the many breakthroughs in the last 30 years that demonstrate we can grow abundant, healthy food and also protect the Earth.

Hunger is not caused by a scarcity of food but by a scarcity of democracy. Thus it can never be solved by new technologies, even if they were to be proved "safe." It can only be solved as citizens build democracies in which government is accountable to them, not private corporate entities.