

# TEN MYTHS ABOUT

# WORLD HUNGER

AT LEAST 700 MILLION PEOPLE DO NOT HAVE ENOUGH TO EAT

HUNGER IS NOT A MYTH—BUT MYTHS KEEP US FROM ENDING HUNGER

## myth 1 There's not enough food to go round

**Reality:** There's enough food in the world to make most people fat!

- Enough food is available to provide at least two kilos per person a day worldwide: a kilo of grain, beans and nuts, about a half-kilo of fruits and vegetables, and nearly a half-kilo of meat, milk and eggs!
- Even most 'hungry countries' have enough food for all their people—many are net exporters of food.

## myth 2 Nature's to blame

**Reality:** Food is always available for those who can afford it—starvation in hard times hits only the poorest, when natural events are the final push over the brink.

- Millions live on the brink of disaster in South Asia, Africa, and elsewhere because they are deprived of land by a powerful few, trapped in the grip of debt, or miserably paid.
- Human institutions and policies determine who eats and who starves. In the West many homeless people die from the cold every winter, yet responsibility doesn't lie with the weather.

## myth 3 There are too many people

**Reality:** Birth rates are falling rapidly worldwide; nowhere does population density explain hunger.

- Some Third World regions are beginning the demographic transition—when birth rates drop in response to an earlier decline in death rates. Rapid population growth is a serious concern for many countries. But for every Bangladesh—a densely populated and hungry country—we find a Nigeria, Brazil or Bolivia, where abundant food coexists with hunger.
- Rapid population growth is not the root cause of hunger. Like hunger itself, it results from inequities that deprive people, especially poor women, of economic opportunity and security. Rapid population growth and hunger are endemic to societies where land ownership, jobs, education, healthcare, and old-age security are beyond the reach of most people.

## myth 4 It's a trade-off: the environment or food

**Reality:** Industrial agriculture is degrading soil and undercutting our food production sources. Environmentally sound alternatives can be more productive than destructive ones.

- Large corporations are mainly responsible for deforestation—creating and profiting from developed-country consumer demand for tropical hardwoods and exotic or out-of-season food items. Most pesticides used in the Third World are applied to export crops, playing little role in feeding the hungry, while in the West they are used to give a blemish-free cosmetic appearance to produce, with no improvement in nutritional value.

## myth 5 The Green Revolution is the answer

**Reality:** The Green Revolution did increase productivity in the 1960s and 1970s. But technology cannot challenge inequality as the root cause of hunger.

- The Green Revolution led to increased production of some grains, mainly by large farms, but at the cost of long-term soil degradation and the loss of crop diversity. Increasing the production of a few crops on larger farms cannot alleviate hunger because the concentration of economic power determines who can buy the additional grain.
- In several of the Green Revolution's biggest successes—India, Mexico, the Philippines—grain production and exports have climbed, while hunger has persisted. A 'New Green Revolution' based on biotechnology could further accentuate this inequality.

## myth 6 We need large farms

**Reality:** Small farmers achieve four-to-five times more output per acre; land reform can increase production.

- Without secure tenure, tenant farmers in the Third World have little incentive to invest in improvements, rotate crops or leave land fallow for the sake of long-term soil fertility.
- Redistribution of land can increase production. A World Bank study of northeast Brazil estimates that redistributing farmland into smaller holdings would raise output by an astonishing 80 percent.

## myth 7 The free market can end hunger

**Reality:** The market only works when poor people have money to buy food.

- Every economy on earth combines the market with government to allocate resources and distribute goods.
- Government has a vital role to play in countering the tendency toward economic concentration, through genuine tax, credit and land reforms to disperse buying power to the poor. Recent trends toward privatization and deregulation are taking us in the opposite direction.

## myth 8 Free trade is the answer

**Reality:** In many poor countries exports of food crops have boomed, squeezing out food for local production, while hunger has continued.

- The trade-promotion formula has proven an abject failure at alleviating hunger. While soybean exports boomed in Brazil—to feed Japanese and European livestock—hunger spread from one-third to two-thirds of the population.
- Where the majority of people have been made too poor to buy the food grown on their own country's soil, those who control agricultural resources orient production to lucrative markets abroad.

## myth 9 The victims are too hungry to fight for their rights

**Reality:** Wherever people suffer needlessly they are also fighting for their rights. People in the rich world can help to remove the obstacles to those rights.

- If poor people were truly passive, few of them could even survive. Around the world, from the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, to the farmers' movement in India, movements for change are underway. People will feed themselves if allowed to do so. Obstacles are often created by large corporations, Western governments, and World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) policies.

## myth 10 All we need is more aid

**Reality:** Foreign aid reinforces the status quo and undercuts local food production in the recipient country.

- Where governments answer only to elites, aid not only fails to reach hungry people, it shores up the very forces working against them. It is used to impose free trade and free-market policies, to promote exports at the expense of food production, and to provide the armaments that repressive governments use to stay in power.
- Even emergency aid—which makes up only five percent of the total—often ends up enriching multinational grain companies while failing to reach the hungry. Local food production is undermined.

*This material is taken from a poster, **Ten Myths About World Hunger**, produced by New Internationalist: [www.newint.org](http://www.newint.org) and Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy: [www.foodfirst.org](http://www.foodfirst.org)*