

Hunger is political: Food banks can't do it all

by [David Beckmann](#) in the [September 21, 2010](#) issue

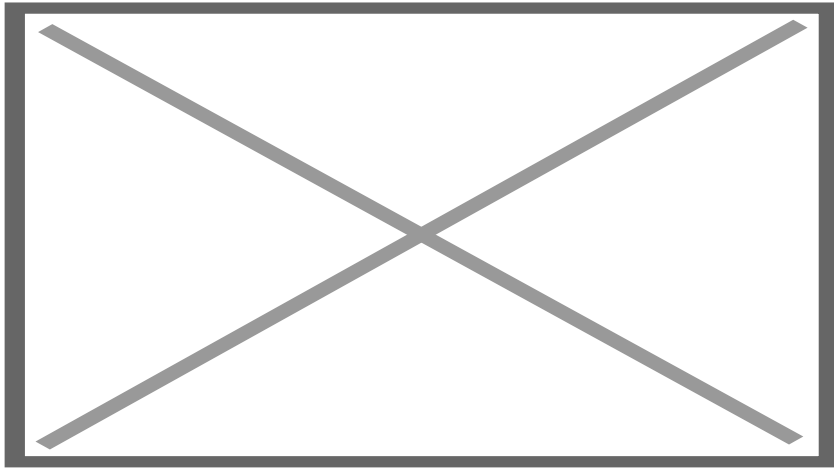


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I was visiting Mtimbe, a settlement of about 40 families on the shore of Lake Nyasa in Mozambique. The town is many miles from the nearest road, and residents have no electricity or running water. They live in thatched huts, and they rely on cassava fields: if the cassava fails, the family goes hungry. My companions and I had traveled by one-engine plane and then in a big wooden boat. As we approached the shore, we saw about 50 local people waiting for us. They were singing a praise song, clapping and moving with the music. Our hosts pulled our luggage from the boat, raised it onto their heads and continued to sing and dance as they made their way up the hill.

We were welcomed by Rebecca Van Meulen, coordinator of a regional Anglican AIDS effort called Life Teams, and by Pedro Kumpila, leader of the local team. Someone asked the people how they'd improved their lives in Mtimbe, and a resident expressed gratitude for peace. Mtimbe was repeatedly savaged during Mozambique's 16 years of civil war. One resident told us that he once had to watch soldiers smash a baby in one of the wooden mortars women use to pound cassava. All of Mtimbe's residents had to flee repeatedly to neighboring countries and live as refugees for years at a time.

One woman said she's grateful for Mtimbe's school. They didn't have a school ten years ago, but nearly all of Mtimbe's children—even the AIDS orphans—are now learning to read and write. A few people even have cell phones—a huge convenience in a place without roads or motor vehicles.

Pedro noted that people in the community who are infected with HIV and AIDS, including some who are near death, are able to take care of their children, farm and teach others about AIDS because they're receiving lifesaving medications.

I was moved by the achievements and hope of the people of Mtimbe. They are among the poorest people on earth, but they are making strides toward a better life. I was also struck by the U.S. government's impact even in this remote place. On one hand, that impact has sometimes been negative. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency had a hand in Mozambique's civil war. United States ethanol subsidies contribute to the village's high grain prices, while Mozambique's government has delayed investment plans because of the financial crisis that started on Wall Street.

On the other hand, however, there is good news. Support by the U.S. for the reduction of Mozambique's debts helped finance schools across the country, and the United States funds most of the AIDS medications in Mozambique. Activist efforts such as Bread for the World in the United States helped the people of Mtimbe by urging the U.S. Congress to support debt relief and development assistance for poor countries.

Hundreds of thousands of communities in developing countries have seen similar improvements over the last several decades, and statistics reflect the progress. According to the World Bank, the number of people living in extreme poverty in developing countries—those living on less than \$1.25 a day—dropped from 1.9 billion in 1980 to 1.4 billion in 2005. The fraction of the population living in extreme poverty dropped from one half to one quarter.

The statistics on undernutrition tell a more complicated story. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization reports that the number of undernourished people in developing countries declined from nearly 1 billion in 1970 to about 800 million in the mid '90s. Unfortunately that number began to climb again and spiked in 2008-2009 to 1 billion. Poor people in developing countries typically spend more than two-thirds of their total income on a staple grain such as rice or wheat, and a surge in grain prices means a spike in hunger. The global economic slowdown also pushed more people into hunger.

There has been unambiguous and dramatic improvement in health and education. Twenty-six thousand children in developing countries die every day from preventable causes, but that number has dropped from 55,000 daily in 1960—a remarkable improvement.

We have seen dramatic progress against poverty, hunger and disease. At a UN summit in 2000, all the nations of the world agreed on the Millennium Development Goals; the first goal is to cut poverty and hunger in half by 2015. Most developing countries are making significant progress on this and other goals.

We recognize God's continuing presence in the progress being made against hunger and poverty. We should thank God as mothers in Central America do. When these women can't feed their babies, they pray. If they are able to work their way out of hunger so that their children can eat and even go to school, many of these mothers remember to thank God. Those of us who see the scale of progress worldwide should do the same.

Americans do a good job of helping people in need directly, as we should. Since the early 1980s the United States has developed a massive system of charitable feeding, and the U.S. religious community has been a driving force. Food banks and food charities distribute an estimated \$5 billion worth of groceries every year. This is a telling demonstration of concern, and food charities provide urgently needed help to many people.

There is another way to help people in need: citizen activism. But when I ask people in churches whether they have ever contacted an elected official about the nutrition programs in the U.S. such as food stamps and school lunches, only a few people raise their hands. We are missing a tremendous opportunity, one that is potentially more powerful than all of the charitable efforts that we've undertaken.

Many of us don't realize that the food provided by all the charities in the country amounts to only about 6 percent of the food that poor people in the U.S. receive from federal food programs such as the National School Lunch Program. Imagine: if Congress increases the federal food programs by just 6 percent, that one decision provides as much help to hungry people as all of our food charities combined. If Congress trims the government's food programs by 6 percent, the effect is the same as if we eliminated all the charitable feeding programs in the country. The reality is that it's impossible to food-bank our way to the end of hunger in America. If we want to make serious progress against hunger, we will have to make our government an active and effective part of the solution.

The national nutrition programs also show that inefficient government programs can be improved. The food stamp program once had a reputation for waste and abuse, but the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations both worked to address those problems. Groups of concerned citizens encouraged the process from outside the government, and today the food stamp program, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), is a model of effectiveness. Instead of food stamps, recipients receive a debit card, which makes it easier to track how benefits are spent.

At the international level the same dynamic applies. United States government programs of development assistance are bigger than all of the international charities combined, and U.S. official development assistance amounts to only two-tenths of 1 percent of our national income—less than the other industrialized countries give. So we're generous in a smaller way, but less generous when it comes to the most important flow of assistance to developing countries.

Yes, we should support international charities. They work directly with poor communities and help them in ways that official programs cannot. But the U.S. government can do some things that charities cannot do. It can help governments in developing countries do a better job of providing public services like schools and rural roads. Its decisions and international leadership on trade policies and questions of war and peace have a big impact on poor people around the world. We can influence how the U.S. government makes those decisions and deploys its massive resources and power.

Many say that progress against hunger and poverty depends mainly on what families and individuals do for themselves. Community organizations and faith-based institutions do provide vital, personal help to people who are struggling. Well-managed businesses and a strong economy create jobs. But the U.S. federal government is especially important in this endeavor, because it establishes the framework within which individuals, charities, businesses and state and local governments make their contributions. The U.S. government also affects the prospects of hungry and poor people worldwide.

Government policies and programs are also essential. Our government could do much more and be much more effective if we citizens participated in the political process. The recent setback for millions of hungry people makes this action urgent, and the current political environment makes big changes possible—but only if there is a significant and sustained increase in activism among people of faith and conscience.

In an era of historic possibilities to reduce economic misery, our nation can open opportunity to hungry and poor people within its borders and around the world. The United States has always had high ideals, and people of faith can rouse our nation to contribute actively to accelerate our progress against hunger. Big changes for hungry and poor people depend on people like you and me. God is calling us to change the politics of hunger.

This article is adapted from Exodus from Hunger: We Are Called to Change the Politics of Hunger, to be published by Westminster John Knox Press.