

**FAMINE AND HUNGER: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE.
A CONCLUDING COMMENT**

MULTILATERAL PROJECT CONFERENCE

**FOOD ON THE TABLE
SEEKING GLOBAL SOLUTIONS TO CHRONIC HUNGER**

**UNITED NATIONS, USA
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15TH, 1987**

PRESENTATION

BY

**LOUIS GRIVETTI
PROGRAM CO-CHAIRMAN**

Hunger attacks the spirit of humanity. The hungry are drained of ambition, energy, initiative, and ultimately their compassion for others. The essence of humanity is destroyed, reflected in the anguished eyes of mothers and fathers who have lost their children to hunger, malnutrition, and starvation. Cynics say: the hungry always are with us. There is a view couched in the gloom-and-doom of world complexities. We of the 20th century -- soon to enter the 21st -- are presented with two choices: we may walk past and turn away from the withered, bony outstretched hand of the hungry and starving, or we may take action and dedicate a portion of our time, professional effort, individual and group resources to solving a component of the complex problem of world hunger.

Hunger and malnutrition have many origins. One origin is due to nature as evidenced by losses of food through drought, earthquake, typhoon, perhaps volcanic eruption. Other origins stem from civil disturbances and social disruptions, whether labor strikes, urban-rural violence, or local-regional warfare. Still other hunger originates with local-regional-national-international economics and politics. Sometimes food relief teams are denied access across national boundaries. In other instances price support systems allow hundreds of thousands of acres of arable, productive land to lie fallow. Even the best of intentions can go wrong: examples may be cited where agricultural practices that work within the temperate zones of the world are introduced without caution to the tropics by misguided agencies. In many such instances environmental degradation and a worsening of food-production conditions has resulted, and peoples being "helped" are worse off than before arrival of the "experts." In other instances bush and forest lands have been cut by developers without prior knowledge of the nutritional promise of available species growing there -- species that have sustained hundreds of thousands of families for hundreds if not thousands of years. Hunger and malnutrition, unfortunately, have many origins.

This past week I have experienced death in the midst of life: my Co-Chairman in organizing and coordinating this United Nations Conference was Emil Mrak. As Professor Tuma mentioned tonight at the beginning of our conference, Dr. Mrak died suddenly and we all mourn his passing. Were he here, Emil would noted that throughout the world this week, humanity has experienced life in the midst of death: hunger and famine continue to plague portions of all inhabited continents. He would also have stated that within the midst of hunger and famine, individuals, families, even societies faced with limited food resources and personal tragedy, survive with dignity. But does their dignity and silent acceptance of hunger fall upon deaf ears? Hunger cries out not only through words but through the probing, pleading faces of children, mothers and fathers. The pain of hunger in some is easy to see; in other instances the pain of hunger is masked and is a silent expression among hundreds of thousands of people too proud to ask for assistance, too ashamed to tell others of their plight . Hunger exists not only in distant lands but is nearby, close. Hunger is present within the United States of America, within California, in Yolo County, within our city, Davis, perhaps in your neighborhood -- possibly experienced by some of you attending tonight.

Hunger often is suffered in silence by proud people. The silence, however, is but a step removed from action; and action can be non-violent or violent. Hunger may be endured, up to a point, but when the injustice of political-economic inaction and collective public indifference is viewed by the hungry as a permanent condition, instead of temporary, then we who are not hungry should beware -- the silence and lethargy of hunger readily become abandoned to rage and retaliation. It will not be the image of Victor Hugo's classic character, Jean Valjean, that seeks justice: such simple days are the stuff of fiction. And if a hungry person, homeless ill-dressed person knocked upon your door tonight and asked for food, what would you do? Would you slam the door then call the police? Would you invite that person into your kitchen for a meal? If willing to do so, how

would you respond to the request for food from 500 hungry residents of Yolo County; of the hundreds of thousands of hungry in California? One compassionate person, of course, cannot feed all the needy. Who, then, makes choices of who receives the food and who does not?

Jean Valjean is not merely a fictional image from French literature: he (and she) are real today in America, in California, in Yolo County, in Davis, perhaps living nearby on your street. What are we to do; how should we proceed in attempting to solve the problems of hunger and malnutrition in the world today? Morally and ethically we must respond but many of us working on problems of international nutrition have concluded that stop-gap measures represented by food relief essentially are bankrupt policies. If hunger and malnutrition are to be reduced in America and abroad, the solution must involve human compassion and commitment set within the framework of self-help.

Tonight -- make a commitment: each of you assembled are aware of hunger and malnutrition. You are concerned, otherwise, you would not have attended this conference. Beyond commitment, however, lies decision. Tonight -- make a decision: become involved in whatever capacity your individual talents and skills can provide. Food does not come from the supermarket. Food is produced, harvested, transported, processed, retransported, marketed, transported, cooked, then consumed. Learn about and understand the local, regional, national, and international food systems. How does food get from "out there" to the dinner table? How is food acted upon, whether favorably or adversely, to either improve or lower nutritional quality? How can costs be lowered and foods distributed more equitably? How can Americans and others develop better storage and preservation techniques, locally and world wide, to reduce spoilage by rusts, molds, insects, and rodents, and preserve the food supply from contamination by toxic wastes?

Consider Africa. If appropriate technology were applied to local village storage techniques throughout the continent today, the available African food supply would triple overnight. But tripling the available food supply does not assure equitable food distribution within and between regions and states. As we speak tonight, the understanding of hunger and malnutrition must be understood within the context of a terrible tyranny of numbers. The clock ticks onward each second with a terrible urgency. It is approaching 10:00 P.M. and during the past three hours of this United Nations Conference, five thousand infants and children have died of starvation, malnutrition, or of diseases directly attributed to unsanitary food and drinking water systems. By 10:00 P.M. tomorrow night, 24 hours from now, as we nestle onto our soft upholstered couches that furnish our warm, well-constructed homes and we watch the opening credits of the television program 20/20, forty thousand infants will have perished! Forty thousand infants: nearly the population of this city, Davis, California. And each night, thereafter, another 40,000! And one year from now -- there mere passing of one calendar year -- nearly 13,000,000 infants will have died, perhaps four million of these babies on the African continent. Thirteen million! Can we comprehend this number? This is more than the estimated population of the greater Los Angeles basin. Thirteen million babies and children! Think of the loss to each family; think of the loss to their community, nation, and to humanity. Thirteen million babies and children who will never experience the joys of education, be married, or the pleasures of growing old with good health. Thirteen million potential intellects lost forever. This is a tragedy beyond magnitude, beyond human comprehension. the number thirteen million easily rolls off the tongue -- thirteen million -- just say it -- thirteen million. If we were to tally all the deaths experienced by three terrible events -- the Irish famine, the Ukrainian famine, and the Holocaust -- the total lives lost does not exceed thirteen million. But it does not end with thirteen million for the obscenity remains next year when another thirteen million will die -- and another thirteen million one year later -- and another, and another, and another. It

is a crisis beyond magnitude of comprehension; it is a crisis perpetuated through indifference and lack of economic and political resolve. It is a question of power: the powerful lack resolve and the powerless -- they remain hungry and malnourished.

This is reality: this is the food-hunger-malnutrition crisis that has been with us yesterday, is with us tonight, and will remain tomorrow. Each of us certainly should feel uncomfortable; but this tyranny of numbers will not simply vanish through kind thoughts, through canned food drives, through endless political debate. Merely talking about hunger and malnutrition or expressing concern, as they say -- doesn't cut it. I have heard students and friends say to me:

"Oh, I get so tired of looking at all those starving babies on television."

A term, recently coined, describes such rejection of reality: famine fatigue. Are we, as Americans, suffering from "famine fatigue?"

In an imperfect world we cannot eliminate hunger and malnutrition. In an imperfect world, however, we can attempt to mitigate the impacts and results of hunger through interdisciplinary approaches that identify and remedy discontinuities in food distribution. We can improve food sanitation, improve food storage, and improve food distribution systems. Such improvements can be made using a combination of social, cultural, and ecological approaches, tempered by the realities of food production in different world regions. I cannot recommend that we transfer, directly, agricultural techniques used in Yolo County to the central Saharan nation of Chad, to northeast Thailand, the arid regions of Peru, or to the rain-fed fertile lands of northern India. But aspects of food production and certain technological components of the Yolo County system could be applicable.

Exchange of culturally correct ecological information on food production has barely been used as an approach to mitigating hunger and malnutrition. This campus has one of the best agricultural libraries in the world. I have proposed in the past a simple, a simple, direct idea: invite national and local officials of foreign nations, or their representatives, to use American libraries where hundreds of thousands of books and research reports are scarcely used. Such guests could select, read, digest, select, then blend, improvise, and adapt specific findings and methods for their local and national needs. Why not share and exchange the countless tens of thousands of expert committee reports that are stored -- basically unread -- on the shelves of our libraries? Why not invite an initial fifty representatives and provide each with a \$5,000 Xerox budget to duplicate what they would need to implement appropriate technological changes in their home country? The budget of such a project would be less than \$300,000 and could have enormous impacts on improving food storage and mitigating the effects of food shortages. Yet under present American and United Nations funding systems such a program cannot be implemented because it is not "research" and there are "copyright problems." And each day that "applied" vs. "basic" research is debated and arguments for and against unrestricted photo-copy of copyrighted information are made, another 40,000 infants and children die.

But if there is a world-wide need, where should one begin? Should we be more concerned with the hungry of Africa or those living in Mississippi, or in Yolo County, California? Where is the greater need; where is the greater morality? Are distance and proximity factors in determining the ethics of need? The April 15th edition of the *Sacramento Bee*, stated that there were 2.3 million Californians -- nearly one in ten -- that needed food assistance. The *Sacramento Bee*, also stated that nearly 170,000 Californians went to bed hungry this past month. Should we solve the problem of California hunger before that of distant Ghana, Niger, or northern Kenya? Many

Californians I have spoken with tell me: look, charity begins at home. But if charity begins at home what shall we do about it? Given the political, economic, medical, and social complexities of California, one of 50 states that comprise a nation seemingly unable to remedy the plight of disenfranchised homeless and hungry, how does one begin?

There are no easy answers. This conclusion has been a common thread throughout each of the talks tonight. But the eyes of a hunger child are haunting; once seen are never forgotten. I do not believe that fasting for one day to experience the hunger of others accomplishes anything. I do not believe that donating cans of creamed corn, beets, or tomato soup to be sent to refugee camps in Thailand accomplishes anything. I do not believe that mere thinking about hunger and malnutrition accomplishes anything. I do believe, however, in something that is simple and basic, and my belief is reflected in an American English idiom: action speak louder than words.

Decide that you will take action. Reflect on the words used by a past generation -- "if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem." Decide to expand your knowledge about hunger and malnutrition. Extend your training and skills. Volunteer: join the Peace Corps or other national service organizations, perhaps OXFAM, Meals for Millions, or another self-help nutrition-related foundation. Teach, travel, and participate. Take part in cultural exchanges, at the city, country, state, national, and international level. Co-operate with organizations dedicated to reduce hunger and malnutrition.

Rhetoric? Of course. He talks to us from behind that podium in his capacity as a university professor, while I am "just a student." Just a student? Let me tell you about students I have known on this campus. Helen Lawhead provided the poignant pictures of malnutrition that were published by the *Davis Enterprise* last Friday. She was a nurse

who returned to UC Davis for training when she decided to become involved in international nutrition issues. Taking her nursing skills and a super-8 and 35mm camera with her to Thailand, she worked inside a Cambodian refugee camp situated along the Thai-Cambodian border. Upon her return to Davis, she worked with Professor Bill Davis from Anthropology, John Reed in the Instructional Television unit on this campus, and me. Her result was a film entitled, *The Children of Kampuchea* . It is a moving, touching, uplifting tribute to the human spirit and her film has been widely shown across campus. On the basis of this initial effort, Ms. Lawhead received a UN grant to film elsewhere, and went to northeast Africa. Consider another student, Joseph Hanna, a UCD varsity soccer player, and undergraduate in the International Agricultural Development major. It was my pleasure to have Joe in one class and he took up my challenge: become involved -- participate -- make something happen. Joe volunteered, was accepted, and assisted the High Commissioner for refugees in Singapore. There, he was assigned to represent refugees throughout southeast Asia, to especially facilitate the diverse needs of boat people. Consider Kathryn Shack, a Ph.D. graduate student in Nutrition Science in our program at UC Davis who worked recently in Papua New Guinea. There, she documented and described the complex interrelationships between agricultural development and childhood malnutrition. Consider Linda Gilliland, another graduate student in Nutrition Science who worked on the food and nutritional needs of hospitalized, elderly Pomo Indians in Santa Rosa, California. This summer Carol Humphry, a UC Davis medical student, will embark upon a survey of maternal and infant food patterns in the drought zone of southeastern Niger, while Elizabeth Metallinos Kataras will investigate problems of diet, iron deficiency, and learning rates of day-care children in urban Greece. The students of Professor Kathryn Dewey have investigated nutritional issues of residents of Yolo County, working with citizens attending the Davis Community Clinic. She and her students continue their work on nutritional problems in rural Mexico and Costa Rica. These are but a few of the programs and people at UC

Davis committed to solving problems of world hunger and malnutrition. You can participate: simply decide to do so.

In closing, were Emil Mrak alive, he would have challenged us tonight to explore the problems and complexities of hunger and malnutrition. He would have asked us to be creative. He would have urged us to assume responsibility, to take positions of leadership. But most of all he would have directed his comments to you, the students in the audience, and I know that he would have said this:

Do not believe the world is too complex, that complex questions cannot be changed. That individuals are lost in a mass and cannot make a difference. Believe in the essence of humanity, the ethic of sharing, or coming to the assistance of those in need.

Take his message into your heart tonight. Perhaps within this audience there are perhaps fifty, perhaps ten, but certainly at least one who will make the commitment to mitigate hunger and malnutrition in America and abroad, to go beyond rhetoric and willing to become part of the solution. Let us know who you are. We want your participation.

Thank you for attending and good evening.