

## **The Scarcity Myth**

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Published in *The Ecologist Magazine* - March 22, 2003

*Today, while hunger stunts the lives of hundreds of millions of people, grassroots movements in Kenya and Brazil are winning the war on want. Frances Moore Lappé investigates.*

It's the spring of 1975. I'm sitting in a rural conference centre somewhere in Iowa surrounded by earnest Lutherans concerned about 'world hunger'. The last event of the evening is a film about the famine killing tens of thousands of Ethiopians. I see images of skeletal women holding babies that are trying in vain to suck milk from their mothers' shrivelled breasts. The explanation is drought.

My hosts at this church gathering, like most US religious activists at the time, were calling for more US food aid to Africa. The tragedy they saw was scarcity over there. So, our duty was to ship our abundance abroad.

Even by then I had learned that there is nothing natural about famine in today's world; that 'underdeveloped' is not an adjective but a verb, as Walter Rodney explained in his 1974 book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.

Fast forward to 2003. A buried *New York Times* story announces that 38 million people are at risk of starvation in Africa. The UN World Food Programme reports that demand for its aid is unprecedented. AIDS and government corruption are partly to blame, but the main culprit is drought.

After three decades the message seems eerily familiar: scarcity, caused by nature's vagaries and specific human frailties, is the culprit. Nothing appears to have changed.

But appearances deceive. Much is changing. While the inertia of the old mindset still has us in its vice, an emergent map is bursting through in surprising places with remarkable rapidity.

### **Manufacturing hunger**

The dominant mindset tells us we're in a perpetual battle to overcome scarcity. Without capitalism's relentless drive, we'd probably all be going hungry by now.

In reality, however, it is this mindset that is propelling us to create the very scarcity we say we so fear. It was precisely to ring this alarm that I wrote *Diet for a Small Planet* 32 years ago. My message was that we humans were creating scarcity in so many different

ways, including by turning livestock – ruminants whose genius is for manufacturing protein – into massive protein disposers.

For aeons ruminants had served humans by converting grass and other non-edibles into high-grade protein. Then, in just a blink of an eye, we'd come up with concentrated grain feeding – industrial-style feedlots that in the US take 16 pounds of grain and soya and reduce them to one pound of food (in this case a cancer- and heart-disease-promoting steak).

Today, while hunger stunts the lives of hundreds of millions (people who are too poor to make a 'market demand' for the food they need), between a third and a half of all the world's grain goes to feed livestock. In the last three decades meat consumption even in low-income countries has doubled. It is the better-off who are creating this demand. Thirty years ago almost no grain went to livestock in China and Thailand, for example. Now over a quarter of grain consumption in these countries occurs in the production of meat.

With feedlot-fed cattle we also invented a superb system for squandering water: the production of just one US-style steer uses enough water to float a destroyer. This, in a world where millions go without clean water and groundwater tables are sinking on every continent.

In many ways, scarcity-creation has sped up. During WWII US government posters advised: 'Eat fish, they feed themselves.' Now, four pounds of 'junk fish' like sardines (long a staple food of the poor) are turned into feed to produce just one pound of salmon. The latter is then priced out of the reach of the poor.

Similarly, bottom-scraping dragnets used in shrimp harvesting capture (and largely destroy) 10 pounds of sea life for every pound that goes to nourish humans. Typically, nearly a quarter of the total global marine harvest is thrown back dead or dying. This, in a world where over-fishing has led to declining catches of virtually every type of commercially sold fish.

Every species but ours has figured out how to feed itself and its offspring without destroying its life support. So, what's up with us? How could it be that we've created a system that destroys more than it creates? A system, what's more, that takes perfectly nutritious food and transforms it into a health hazard?

An epidemic of obesity – afflicting as many people as go hungry – is sweeping the planet. Food corporations, the world's biggest advertisers, have discovered that the highest profits are to be made through marketing 'food products' that are stripped of nutrients but laden with fat and sugar. It's now food (either too little, or too much of it) that is the culprit in more than half of all disease-related lost years on our planet.

## **Abundant truth**

The grip of primitive ‘marketism’ seems never to have been tighter. Everything – from drinking water to human genes – is being ‘propertised’ as we’re told that deliberative devices for sharing the commons for common benefit have all flopped.

At the very same time, but unseen by most of us, a new and very different mindset is emerging. If you look, you can see it. But you have to really look. That’s what my daughter Anna and I did when we wrote *Hope’s Edge*. We travelled on five continents to nine countries. One was Kenya, where we talked with village women – members of Wangari Maathai’s Green Belt Movement. These unschooled women are accomplishing what few would have considered possible. Confounding the scepticism of government foresters, they have created 6,000 cooperative tree nurseries throughout the country and planted 20 million trees.

Emboldened, Green Belters also began to question the impoverishing dependence on single exports like coffee (the producer prices of which have now hit an historic bottom). They began to re-learn the best of traditional farming practices and to reclaim lost crops. These activities yielded stronger community bonds, problem-solving groups, skills and enhanced food security.

All this was threatening to the government of Kenya’s former president Daniel Arap Moi. Under his rule, Maathai had been jailed and beaten more than once for her pro-democracy, pro-environment activities. Yet, in the recent elections she out-pollled her closest opponent by 50 to one. She was subsequently appointed deputy minister for the environment and natural resources. Women danced in Nairobi’s streets.

## **Brazil’s landless movement**

Before starting our journey, we read all the relevant texts, including Thomas Friedman’s *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. The four-time Pulitzer Prize-winner dismisses any alternative to corporate globalisation, stating: ‘There is no more mint chocolate chip, there is no more strawberry swirl, there is no more lemon-lime... There is only [free-market] vanilla and North Korea.’ Friedman uses Brazil to make his point, describing the only opposition to the global corporate march as disorganised street life bereft of ideology or even a manifesto.

Arriving in Brazil ourselves, we were astonished to see what Friedman’s mental map had blinded him to: the largest social movement in the hemisphere, and one that embodies not only a sophisticated critique of corporate globalisation but an alternative coming to life in thousands of communities across Brazil.

That blind spot is the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST), a 20-year-old undertaking that has settled a quarter of a million families on 15 million acres of land throughout

Brazil. By taking advantage of a constitutional provision mandating the government to redistribute unused land, the MST has used civil disobedience to press its case.

Newly settled MST families told us that getting their own land was only a beginning. They had to consider all aspects of community-building, including the role of economic profit relative to other values. ('Capitalism doesn't care about the individual,' one young member told us. We chuckled at how discordant his comment would sound to a US ear.)

What they are coming up with is hardly 'anti-market'. Some MST farms, co-ops, and small businesses even sell internationally. But market exchange is counterbalanced by other values, with community solidarity and the health of the environment the most important. MSTers told us they were rejecting chemical agriculture not only because of the hazard to their own health (many had suffered pesticide poisoning as farm workers) but also out of concern that chemical residues might hurt the consumer.

A Brazilian research centre recently totalled the cost to the government of land reform. The figure included compensation for landowners, legal expenses and credit for new farmers. It then compared this figure with the cost of the number of people affected by land reform migrating to urban shanty towns instead. It turned out that the latter – the market's solution – would exceed in just one month the expense of an entire year of settling new farmers.

### **Food first**

We also visited Brazil's fourth largest city – Belo Horizonte. In 1993, its government had declared food a right of citizenship. This shift of thinking triggered dozens of innovations that have begun to end hunger in the city.

Little patches of city-owned land were made available at low rent to local organic farmers as long as they would keep prices within the reach of poor, inner-city dwellers. The city redirected the 13 cents provided by the federal government for each school child's lunch away from the purchase of corporate processed foods to buying local organic food instead. The result is enhanced children's nutritional intake.

To keep the market honest, the city teamed up with university researchers who each week posted the lowest prices of 45 basic food commodities at bus stops and broadcast them over radio. This way, inner city dwellers had sound information to fight against price gouging by unscrupulous grocers.

With this new food-as-a-right-of-citizenship perspective, people began to perceive abundance where they had never seen it before: manioc leaves and egg shells previously tossed out as waste were processed into a nutritious additive for bread for school kids.

All of these efforts consume, we were told, only 1 per cent of the municipal budget. Hopefully Brazil's new president Luis Inazio 'Lula' da Silva will look to Belo Horizonte

for clues as to how to implement his 'zero hunger' pledge in a country where at least 25 million now go without.

At the end of our stay in Belo Horizonte, we met Adriana Aranha, whose job in city government is to coordinate all these efforts. 'When you began,' I asked her, 'did you realise how much difference your efforts might make? Did you know how out of step you were with the neo-liberal approach that says government can do no good and the market can do no harm?'

Aranha replied, animated and intense, in Portuguese. And we couldn't understand a word. We sat patiently, but then I saw her eyes start to tear up. Unable to wait any longer, I nudged our interpreter. 'Please, what is she saying?'

'I knew we were out of step,' Aranha said. 'We had so much hunger in the world, but what is so upsetting, what I didn't know when I started this, is it's so easy to end it.'

I've thought about that conversation many times since. Why was Aranha able to say 'it's easy'? I realise now that she is right if – only if – we can see with new eyes and free ourselves from the choking momentum of the inherited mental map. Then we can suddenly see new, more life-serving forms emerging.

These breakthroughs may be hard to detect – not only because the prevailing media doesn't cover them, but also because they do not constitute a new 'ism'. They don't add up to a new, packaged formula. They are – like Kenya's Green Belt Movement and the triumphs of Brazil's MST – about ordinary people trusting their deepest values as well as their common sense. In the process new mental maps emerge in which human beings are more than narrow consumers and democracy is more than a matter of pre-paid elections.