Building Prosperity From the Ground Up

Today, more than 925 million people—one-sixth of the world’s population—suffer from undernourishment. We have all seen the harrowing images of desperate, grinding poverty in the developing world. We want to take action, but the vastness and depth of global hunger and poverty can make it feel overwhelming and inevitable. It is not inevitable. We can end hunger and poverty, but it will take a groundswell of people to achieve it. With strategic interventions, the women and men of the developing world can end their own hunger and poverty.

Mobilizing People at the Grassroots Level to Build Self-Reliance

When people are chronically hungry, they do not simply lack food. Chronic hunger is often coupled with marginalization, subjugation, disempowerment and resignation. Many impoverished communities in the developing world have watched development initiatives sweep in with abundant goods and services and then depart, leaving the community no better than it started once the goods and services are no longer available. They feel powerless and have little hope for change. They become resigned to thinking that poverty is their fate.

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Simply addressing physiological hunger is not a sustainable solution—it actually perpetuates the cycle. The key is empowering impoverished communities to take action to meet their basic needs. By building capacities, leadership, confidence and sense of community, people living in the conditions of hunger and poverty can be self-reliant, which will ultimately lead to lasting improvement. Using this approach, the cycle of poverty can be broken by the people who are living it every day.

Empowering Women as Key Change Agents

Studies show that when women are supported and empowered, all of society benefits. Their families are healthier, more children go to school, agricultural productivity improves and incomes increase. In short, communities become more resilient. Empowering women to be change agents is an essential element in ending global hunger and poverty. Not only do women comprise almost 60 percent of the world’s hungry people; they also bear almost all responsibility for meeting basic needs of the family. They cook and serve food; collect water and fuel; and care for the children, elderly and sick in the community. Women also produce more than 50 percent of all food grown worldwide. Despite their critical role, women are systematically denied the resources, information and freedom of action they need to effectively fulfill this responsibility.

Research shows that women are far more likely than men to financially invest in their children’s health, education and household needs. For example, when women farmers receive the same inputs as male farmers, output can increase up to 22 percent. A mother’s social and economic status is one of the best indicators of whether her children will escape poverty and be healthy. There are a number of successful microfinance programs that are specifically focused on the economic

Community members help build Zakpota Epicenter in Benin (2007).

Rural Bank Manager at Vowogdo Epicenter in Burkina Faso with her child (2010).

A recent study* showed that 90% of a woman’s income will go back to the family.

empowerment of women in developing countries. Through access to microfinance, women engage in income-generating activities, increase their incomes and are better able to meet their families’ basic needs. Furthermore, women develop self-confidence and assertiveness, and thus gain elevated status in their households and communities. Such programs create a new future where women and men are equal partners in the well being of their families and their community.

If we want to end world hunger and abject poverty, it is imperative that we invest in women.

An On-the-Ground Strategy for Success

Fighting hunger and poverty on a global scale hinges on community-led development. In Africa, The Hunger Project (THP) developed an approach called the Epicenter Strategy, which has been successfully used to mobilize clusters of rural villages to create and run programs to achieve sustainable progress in health, food security, education, agriculture and income generation. Through the Epicenter Strategy, communities that were once impoverished become self-reliant in approximately five to eight years.

Initially, people from around 10 to 15 villages voluntarily come together to participate in a Vision, Commitment and Action Workshop. They create a common vision and commit to take actions, both individually and collectively, to end hunger and poverty in their villages. It is with these collective commitments that a sense of community and accomplishment develops among the villagers.

Another central component of the Epicenter Strategy is the construction of the Epicenter building. Through their own labor, the villagers construct a building that houses a training center, meeting hall, food-processing center, health clinic, library and classrooms. Nurses’ quarters, a food bank and demonstration farm, where farmers learn new techniques to improve their crops, are also constructed nearby.

After the Epicenter building is in place and the support programs are up and running, the community continues working toward meeting the following goals:

- The empowerment of women
- Increased adult and child literacy
- Improvement in maternal and child health
- Increased food security
- Reduction of diseases such as malaria and HIV/AIDS
- Increased access to credit and creation of income-generating activities
- Environmentally sustainable and appropriate farming practices

As these goals are accomplished, the community’s confidence and influence increase, and they are able to successfully make demands of the local government for services and personnel, such as teachers and health professionals. Simply put, the community begins to emerge from the stranglehold of chronic hunger and poverty.

In addition to its work in Africa, THP has other programs around the world to build prosperity from the ground up. In India, THP works with women who have been elected to their village councils. Federation meetings of elected women (top—Jaipur, India) and Women’s Leadership Workshops (bottom—Bikaner, India), empower the women to be effective change agents for the end of hunger in their villages (2009).
The Epicenter Strategy has been implemented in eight countries, reaching an estimated 1.8 million people, who are proving through their actions that an end to hunger and poverty is possible.

As the community continues to make progress, a Microfinance Program targeted toward rural women provides a crucial missing link for ending poverty—the economic empowerment of women. With the Microfinance Program, women can expand or start businesses and with their income, improve their farms, purchase food, send their children to school and save for the future. For example, with an initial loan of about $75, Elizabeth Kalimbuka of Malawi started a cattle business. Not only has she since made a profit and repaid her loan, she also has accumulated enough food for her family until the next harvest season (about four months), renovated her home and is able to pay school tuition for her niece and nephew.

The ultimate goal of the program is to gain government recognition and operate as a licensed Rural Bank. Once this is achieved, the Rural Bank provides the entire Epicenter community with sustainable access to savings and credit facilities. Since the inception of the Microfinance Program in 1999, THP has grown the loan portfolio to approximately US$2.4 million across Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique, Senegal and Uganda.

The Epicenter Strategy is an integrative model of development that can be applied anywhere in the world. It has been implemented in eight countries in Africa, reaching an estimated 1.8 million people who are proving through their actions that an end to hunger and poverty is possible. To date, 21 Epicenters are deemed self-reliant, meaning they are able to fund their own activities and require little or no financial investment from The Hunger Project. The communities have consistent and reliable access to healthcare, education, food, clean water, safe sanitation, savings and credit. Dozens more communities are well on their way to achieving the same reality.

Imported food leads to destabilization and reduced local market prices, threatening the livelihoods of local producers upon whom long-term food security depends.

Of US foreign aid food is grown in the US.

Ultimately, the key to ending hunger and poverty will only be found in the women and men who live that life each and every day.