

# Building Prosperity From the Ground Up

**T**oday, more than 925 million people—one-sixth of the world’s population—suffer from undernourishment.<sup>1</sup> 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

**W**hen 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.



⋮ The Hunger Project Staff

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

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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

**S**tudies 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;<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Despite their critical role, women are systematically



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

denied the resources, information and freedom of action they need to effectively fulfill this responsibility.

Investing in women pays off. 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.<sup>4</sup> A mother’s social and economic status is one of the best indicators of whether her children will escape poverty and be healthy.<sup>5</sup>

There are a number of successful microfinance programs that are specifically focused on the economic

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A recent study\* showed that



\*Chris Fortson, “Women’s Rights Vital for Developing World,” Yale News Daily 2003.



All photos courtesy The Hunger Project

Communities in Malawi have seen great success using the Epicenter Strategy. These two teachers changed their lives by getting the education needed to become teachers and are now changing the lives of the next generation. (2009)

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

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

**F**ighting 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.



Photo courtesy The Hunger Project/Paul Voorhuis 2006

**“Power can be taken, but not given. The process of the taking is empowerment in itself.”** ∞ Gloria Steinem



Photo courtesy The Hunger Project/Paul Voorhuis 2006

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 (2006).

**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 integrated 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<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> Dozens more communities are well on their way to achieving the same reality.

### **Our Role as a Developed Nation**

**T**he best way for us—as individuals or as a nation—is to partner with and invest our financial resources in the women and men in the developing world.

Both through our government and through charitable non-governmental organizations, Americans spend billions of dollars on aid to the developing world. It is critical that these significant resources constitute more than just a band-aid but a sustainable solution. An example of a band-aid or of intervention that does not promote sustainability or self-reliance is food aid. The United States, in recent years, has provided much of its aid in the form of food, but three-quarters of that food is grown in the US.<sup>8</sup> This US-grown food, when imported to developing countries, leads to destabilization and reduced local market prices, threatening the livelihoods of local producers and traders upon whom long-term food security depends.<sup>9</sup> However, given recent commitments by world leaders, it seems as though the United States and the world is at



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*This woman was able to greatly improve her and her family's living conditions because of a small loan that allowed her to start her own business selling rice. (2005)*

the threshold of an extraordinary sea change in how we spend foreign aid and that the focus is shifting to empowering people to become self-reliant. For example, in July 2009, world leaders made an unparalleled financial commitment to end world hunger at the G8 summit. They announced a commitment of \$20 billion over three years for a Food Security Initiative that will support rural development in developing countries. This commitment is not only financially significant, but it also represents a shift in how the world is seeking to address the issues of hunger and poverty. Rather than providing short-term food aid, the focus is shifting

*The Hunger Project ([www.thp.org](http://www.thp.org)) is a global, non-profit, strategic organization committed to the sustainable end of world hunger. In Africa, South Asia and Latin America, The Hunger Project seeks to end hunger and poverty by empowering people to lead lives of self-reliance, meet their own basic needs and build better futures for their children.*



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toward building the capacity of rural farmers, particularly women, in the developing world to increase their food production.

In the developed world, in addition to governments, individuals also have an important role to play in the fight against hunger and poverty. A small financial contribution to a non-profit or via a microfinance program that focuses on empowering people, particularly women, at the grassroots level can have a remarkable impact on a family's life. For example, \$60 could provide a loan to a rural woman, who in turn starts a small business that will generate income that she uses to send her children to school and provide them with nourishing food.

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. As governments and individuals in the developed world, it is our responsibility to partner with people and invest in them so they too can lead lives of self-reliance, meet their own basic needs and build better futures for their children. Together—governments and individuals in the developing and developed world—must work to ensure that every woman, man and child has the opportunity to live a dignified life.

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