

Criminal negligence: The scourge of world hunger

by [Roger Thurow](#) in the [August 24, 2010](#) issue



FACES OF THE HUNGRY: Tesfaye Ketema and five-year-old Hagirso Ketema wait for food aid in an emergency feeding tent in Boricha, Ethiopia, in 2003.

I should have seen my road to Damascus moment approaching. I'd been warned.

"Looking into the eyes of someone dying of hunger becomes a disease of the soul," Volli Carucci of the United Nations World Food Program told me on my first day in Ethiopia.

A disease of the soul? I had received an overdose of medical admonishments during my many years of covering Africa for the *Wall Street Journal*: Get your yellow fever shot. Don't forget the malaria pills. Beware bilharzia in standing water. Avoid the meningitis season. Be cautious in the cholera zones. But never before had I been warned about my soul. Now where, I wondered dubiously, could I get a shot or pill for that?

We were on a top floor of the WFP's building in Addis Ababa in the spring of 2003, looking out on a country ravaged by an epic famine. Even Carucci, a veteran of many hunger emergencies, was stunned by the magnitude of this one: more than 14 million people were on the doorstep of starvation—a greater number than in the famine of 1984, which had inspired the Live Aid concerts and the “We Are the World” anthem as well as pious pledges of “Never again!”

“Tomorrow,” Carucci said, sensing my doubt, “you will see.” Early the next day we were traveling south from Addis Ababa through the drought-choked plains of the Great Rift Valley. After several hours, the paved but pothole-embroidered road gave way to a rugged dirt trail that corkscrewed up into the highlands. By midafternoon we were standing in a field of rocks on the Boricha plateau, where the famine was particularly acute. Behind us were several olive-green tents. We entered one, following the local director of Ethiopia's Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission.

Inside, dozens of children were starving to death. Our first steps took us beside a mattress where two stick-figure infants were receiving nourishment through nose tubes. Just beyond them, dozens of parents hunched over other mattresses, keeping a deathwatch over their children.

We made our way to a corner of the tent where five-year-old Hagirso was propped up between the legs of his father, Tesfaye Ketema. A few days before, Ketema explained, he had cradled his emaciated son for an hour and a half as they rode in a donkey-drawn wagon over rutted dirt roads to this famine clinic. A year earlier he had made the same trip, but on that trip he had carried bags of surplus grain to the Boricha market after a bumper harvest.

Now his son was on the verge of starvation. He weighed just 27 pounds when he arrived at the clinic—the very portrait of famine: swollen head, bone-thin arms and legs. His eyes, remarkable in a frightening way, were deep black holes. No hint of playfulness. No baleful beseeching. They were empty, lifeless.

Hagirso's lifeless eyes changed me. I saw wrongs and injustices I hadn't noticed before. Why was such hunger happening *now*, after two years of bumper harvests? Why was it happening *again*, 19 years after the 1984 famine? Why was it happening *still*, at the dawn of the 21st century, when more food was being produced than ever before?

Looking into Hagirso's eyes touched me in a way nothing else in Africa ever had. A new passion and purpose—and an urgency to answer those questions—seized me. What I saw infected my soul. And what I saw was what Carucci had predicted I'd see: "You see that nobody should have to die of hunger."

As a priest is called to the ministry, I felt called to the hunger story. It was as if all my previous adventures as a journalist, particularly the many years of foreign corresponding, had led me to this point. Having arrived at the starvation tents of Boricha after years of wandering from story to story as a foreign correspondent, I now wanted to settle and concentrate on one story: hunger. Of course other big stories would break: the Iraq war, the Asian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, the global financial collapse. But to me the biggest story of all was the tragedy of 25,000 people in the developing world dying every day of hunger, malnutrition and related diseases.

I was raised in the Lutheran church and schools, and I know the Bible well. Now one particular passage was becoming my compass: "For I was hungry and you gave me food. . . . What you do to the least of my brothers, you do unto me."

The road to Boricha became my road to Damascus. Looking into the eyes of the starving, I saw Matthew 25. Surely the hungry in the emergency feeding tents of Boricha were the least of all.

Starvation wasn't anywhere on my radar when I was growing up amid the wheat and corn fields of Illinois and Iowa, the breadbaskets of the world. Even when I moved to Africa in 1986, to establish the *Journal's* Johannesburg office, I didn't pay much attention to the hungry. For five years I was preoccupied with covering the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. On subsequent visits to Africa, hunger was part of the wallpaper, the background noise of the continent. For me, and for much of the world, hunger was a given in Africa, an inevitability.

That all changed in Ethiopia. I saw for the first time that it didn't have to happen.

Kneeling beside Hagirso's mattress, I listened to Ketema tell his story. His bumper harvests from the two previous years had been replicated across the country. The surplus production overwhelmed Ethiopia's underdeveloped markets. Prices collapsed. What Ketema and other peasant farmers received from the merchants of Boricha was barely enough to cover their planting and harvesting costs; many of them lost money. The next planting season, with their incentive sapped, they cut

back on their costs by sowing cheaper, lower-quality corn seed, by abandoning the use of fertilizer and by taking land out of production. They knew this would result in smaller harvests, but they calculated that they would still reap enough to feed their families. But then the rains failed. Drought spread across the land. The harvests shrank further than expected and the emergency feeding tents filled. The markets had failed before the weather did. The tragedy was of biblical proportions: feast giving way to famine, the success of the farmers leading to their failure.

As he stared at his starving son, Ketema's eyes filled with tears and guilt. What had he done to his child? I wondered something else: What had we done to his child?

In reporting an earlier story on African agriculture, *WSJ* colleague Scott Kilman and I had come across a warning from Norman Borlaug, the American crop breeder who won the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize for saving millions from starvation with his work on the Green Revolution in Asia. In his Nobel lecture, Borlaug pleaded, "Man can and must prevent the tragedy of famine in the future instead of merely trying with pious regret to salvage the human wreckage of the famine, as he has so often done in the past. We will be guilty of criminal negligence, without extenuation, if we permit future famines."

Criminal negligence. Boricha 2003 wasn't just a famine scene; it was a crime scene, Borlaug's prophecy come to pass. The world's neglect of Africa's farmers—the sharp decline in investment that could have built up their storage capability and improved their access to markets to absorb the surplus, the lending conditions that forbade crop price supports that are common in the U.S. and Europe, the one-sided subsidy system that gave an advantage to Western farmers in world trade, the American food aid system that put U.S. agriculture interests ahead of the interests of those being helped—had all dramatically come to bear in Ethiopia.

I began to press *Journal* editors to stretch our coverage beyond one story on the economics of the Ethiopian famine into a regular hunger beat. To grab the attention of readers who might be suffering from emotion fatigue, I would get them to look into the eyes of the hungry, to share the emotions I felt. The reporting needed to go beyond the human suffering, to capture the human neglect, the shame that at the dawn of the 21st century this could be happening.

After several years on my self-styled hunger beat at the *Journal*—including writing about hunger in the U.S. upon my return home in 2005—I felt there was more that

needed to be written. I knew that my soul wouldn't rest until Scott Kilman and I had put all we knew about hunger into a book. So we set out to write *Enough: Why the World's Poorest Starve in an Age of Plenty*. Our mission was to take readers into the eyes of the hungry, to outrage and inspire, to create a constituency that would shout, "Enough is enough!"

I wanted everyone to see what I had seen: no one should have to die of hunger—not in the 21st century. Not after the Green Revolution was one of the great scientific achievements of the 20th century.

Yet here we stand, one decade into the new millennium, and the hunger crisis is worsening. The roll call of the world's chronically hungry has swelled dramatically in recent years, accelerated by the global food crisis of 2008–2009 and soaring past 1 billion people. That, the folks who do the counting tell us, is the highest absolute number in history.

The book, it turns out, wasn't enough to quell my restlessness. So after 30 years at the *Wall Street Journal*, I left the paper to follow my road to Boricha and take up a new mission with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs: to raise the clamor to make ending hunger through agriculture development the great populist cause and singular achievement of this decade.

The last decade put clamor-raising precedence on our side. Amid the wreckage of the global financial system stands the miracle of debt relief for the poorest countries of the world. Amid the rampant human suffering from wars and swindles came great advancements on AIDS. Amid so many divisions, the world at least gathered together—even if the results fell short of the ambition—to confront the challenge of climate change. As the clamor intensified on these issues, we saw policies change, great sums of money raised, millions of lives saved.

Why not a clamor for action against hunger?

The Jubilee 2000 campaigners, rising out of British church pews, barged into international politics and put the issue of debt relief for the poorest nations on the front burner. The cold hearts of bean counters in world capitals and international lending institutions melted, and billions of dollars in debt were forgiven, wiped off the books.

When the Jubilee campaigners first came to the United States, where the purse strings of global finance resided, they faced deep skepticism. Debt relief, critics said, would do nothing more than encourage further fiscal indiscipline in the developing world. Besides, members of Congress told the campaigners, they were hearing no clamor back home among their constituencies.

The campaigners huddled and decided, "They want clamor, we'll give them clamor." They built political pressure from gatherings in church basements, from potluck dinners and ice cream socials.

Debt relief, a most arcane subject, suddenly became sexy. Finance committee meetings in Washington released tears instead of snores. The hushed silence wasn't from the tedium of interest rate calculations but from stories of how onerous debt levels were preventing mothers from feeding their children. The skeptics scoffed that the Jubilee campaigners were hopelessly quixotic, that debt relief would never happen. But it did.

Why not hunger relief?

A multitude of activists, many of them from the Jubilee campaign, raised the clamor on the devastation of the AIDS epidemic. Again the skeptics roared, "It'll never happen." But a global fund was created and soon filled with billions of dollars. President Bush launched a \$15 billion initiative, and Congress approved. AIDS drugs were rushed into Africa.

Why not hunger?

Environmentalists, galvanized by the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, raised the clamor and elevated climate change to a top position on the world agenda.

Why not hunger?

In the final months of 2009, two global gatherings were scheduled: a world food summit in Rome and a world climate change summit in Copenhagen. Very few world leaders made the pilgrimage to Rome, but they all flocked to Denmark, tripping over each other on the way to the cameras and microphones.

Why not hunger?

This is the wider inconvenient truth: If we don't end hunger, which is the common enemy of all development efforts, none of the campaigners on these other issues can truly claim success. All the AIDS medicine rushing into Africa doesn't have the impact it should on hungry, starving bodies. There's a very pointed African saying: Giving such drugs to a hungry person is like washing your hands and then drying them in the dirt. After all, what do our medicine prescriptions commonly say? Take with food!

Any success on the climate change front will depend on creating conditions in which those who likely will be the most impacted—the small farmers in Africa around the equator and the Sahel—can still feed their families. They will need new water-harvesting techniques, irrigation and drought-resistant seeds.

So why not hunger?

It's 2010. It is time to end the neglect of agriculture development, as President Obama is attempting to do in his "Feed the Future" initiative. It is time to end the hypocrisy and blind self-interest of our policies, as some in Congress are proposing.

It is time for everyone to look into the eyes of the starving, where we all can see that nobody should have to die of hunger.