

Eradicating hunger

by [Aimee Moiso](#) in the [May 16, 2001](#) issue

*The Third Freedom: Ending Hunger in our Time* by George McGovern

*Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid* by Jenny Edkins

The simplistic idea that world hunger and famine are primarily due to natural disasters and food scarcity no longer dominates public discourse. Despite occasional bickering about the best methods of aid and development, experts agree that there is enough food in the world to feed everyone and that we know how to end hunger.

Still, we need to rethink some of our traditional responses to hunger. Though they approach their topic in widely divergent ways, George McGovern and Jenny Edkins agree that solving the problem of hunger and famine involves more than just sending food to the developing world.

As a former senator and presidential candidate and the current U.S. ambassador to the UN Agencies on Food and Agriculture, McGovern speaks with authority when he asserts that hunger is a political issue. He claims that hunger is not simply a matter of food, but of priorities. For the first time in history, we have the technology, resources and knowledge that would allow us at reasonable cost to eradicate widespread hunger. "The big question is, Do we have the political leadership and the will to end this scourge in our time?"

McGovern outlines his recommendations for ending hunger during the next 30 years through combining the influence of the U.S. government with the international capacities of the United Nations. His ideas range from the conventional to the cutting edge: McGovern proposes increased agricultural development and training in developing countries and food reserves worldwide, while pushing for further scientific research and the use of genetically modified crops. He suggests introducing expanded versions of U.S. domestic antihunger programs, such as a universal school lunch program in developing nations, and a global supplemental nutrition program for low-income women, infants and children, modeled after the WIC (Women, Infants and Children) program.

McGovern's book makes the complex and potentially divisive issue of global economics easy for laypeople to understand even as it offers serious analysis of the realities of our increasingly interdependent world. He makes clear that the costs of failing to eradicate hunger far outweighs any economic or political drawbacks of the programs he suggests.

Though the governmental and private organizations that would take up the charge may find some specifics of McGovern's plan debatable, his core message is both morally compelling and hard to dispute: hunger is a solvable problem, and it is time the governments of the world commit to solving it.

In contrast to McGovern's practical and readable approach, Edkins presents a theoretical and philosophical understanding of hunger and famine, speaking almost entirely in the abstract. Her general purpose is to rethink famine by juxtaposing famine theory and our modern, technological responses to hunger. But in her attempts to examine famine through the vague lens of "modernity's hunger for truth," Edkins writes of famine in a way that has no functional application and no discernible audience.

Edkins, a lecturer in the department of international politics at the University of Wales-Aberystwyth, does manage to dissect some traditional and modern responses to famine, including country-to-country global food aid and long-term development programs, but her results are muddled.

In seeming contradiction, she both argues for a rethinking of theories of famine relief and claims their futility, effectively discounting any potential solutions. "It is not a question of finding better early warning systems, more participatory development projects, or faster methods of delivering relief. Nor is it a question of seeking the deeper, more structural causes of famines, nor its complexities," she writes. She identifies international power relations and violence as sources of famine, but her conclusion begs the question: If power relations are the cause, is not the remedy to examine their structures and complexities for solutions?

Not that Edkins claims to offer answers. "The practical political aim of this book is neither to understand famine nor to provide a solution," she writes. Unfortunately, the result is a digressive book of little practical political use to those able to respond tangibly to famine.

Bombarded with images of severe hunger and famine in the 1980s and early '90s, people grew weary of hearing about the seeming hopelessness of global poverty. It's refreshing to see new books appearing on this old subject, and heartening to know that solutions are at hand.