



BOOK REVIEW

Seasons of Hunger: Fighting Cycles of Quiet Starvation Among the World's Rural Poor

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Title: Seasons of hunger: Fighting cycles of quiet starvation among the world's rural poor
Authors: Stephen Devereaux, Bapu Vaitla and Samuel Hauenstein Swan
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The Action Against Hunger International Network has a policy research and advocacy department called Hunger Watch which concerns itself with current food crises. This book is part of the Hunger Watch series of publications. The focus is on cyclical seasonal hunger, which is a greatly neglected part of the hunger phenomenon.

The authors are well qualified to address the topic: Stephen Devereaux is a director of the Centre for Social Protection at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex; Bapu Vaitla is an advocacy and research officer for Action Against Hunger; and Samuel Hauenstein Swan works for humanitarian organisations dealing with health, hunger and rights issues.

The book is based mainly on field research conducted by the authors in various countries, primarily Malawi and India, but also Niger, Ethiopia, Ghana and Namibia. The following methods were used for the field research: household and individual interviews; group discussions; participatory research; observation; and the use of existing statistics. The text is also augmented by photographs.

The book is divided into three parts: Part One is called "Those with cold hands" and it outlines the problem by focusing on rainfall patterns and poverty; small plots and low crop yields; pests and spoilage; seasonal food price fluctuations; lack of employment opportunities;

coping strategies for hunger; child malnutrition; and the link between seasonal hunger and famine.

Part Two is called “A world full of good ideas” and it proposes a comprehensive intervention framework to fight seasonal hunger. This consists of three categories: (i) Emergency assistance, which deals with price-indexed cash transfers and food assistance; nutritional and food security surveillance systems; and community-based management of acute malnutrition; (ii) A social protection safety net, which focuses on seasonal employment programmes; social pensions; community-based child growth promotion; weather-indexed agricultural insurance; price-banding and grain reserves; and (iii) Agricultural livelihood development, which pays attention to access to land; access to water; access to fertilizers and seed; and access to financial services.

Some of these strategies are employed in the countries mentioned, and the authors analyse the outcomes and suggest improvements for their implementation.

Part Three is called “From policy to rights” in which the authors examine “holes” in existing social protection programmes in India, which is the largest provider of food assistance in the world. They conclude that the full potential of the interventions is constrained by political factors, such as bureaucratic obstructions. India itself provides the answer “and inspiration”, namely, the Right to Food Campaign which is a movement to end hunger in India. The Campaign uses lawsuits to direct the government to expand and improve existing social protection programmes. On this point, the authors have this message: “citizens worldwide can demand that the right to food be made legally enforceable” (p 104). They note that there are existing global agreements on the right to food and the incorporation of rights should be written into the national law of countries.

The authors estimate the actual cost of a “minimum essential package” for those who suffer from seasonal hunger to consist of community-based management of acute malnutrition; employment guarantee programmes; social pensions; and child growth promotion. They point out that wealthy countries have an obligation to and global accountability for the right to food.

The book has a logical progression from “unmasking” the problem to suggesting solutions and projecting costs. Its significance also lies in the well-researched, practical yet attainable interventions proposed to combat seasonal hunger. The book will be very useful for a wide variety of academics and people involved in governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).