

# Viewpoints: Time to meet challenge of ending hunger

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On this day of Thanksgiving when we pause to give thanks for the bounty on our plates, let us also pause to remember that one-sixth of all humanity is hungry. One billion people live on the edge. It is not just a moral call to action, it is a crisis that threatens world peace and affects all of us. One billion people are dependent on the rest of us and not contributing to the world's economy.

Most Americans give little thought to agriculture policy or food production, even in California, our leading agricultural state. We are spoiled. America's capacity to produce food is so advanced that we can purchase virtually any food we want, anywhere, at any time.

Such productivity is unprecedented. In the United States, we spent only 10 percent of our disposable income on food. Indeed, it is the productivity of our farmers that allows us the disposable income to purchase those BlackBerrys and flat-screen TVs.

By comparison, in Africa, life expectancy is now less than 40 years of age in many countries. The combined effect of hunger and AIDS has eliminated an entire generation. One-third of the African population suffers from hunger.

As is usually the case, it is the children who are the most vulnerable. In developing countries, many millions of children go to school hungry every day. Worldwide, every day 18,000 children die due to hunger. That is why, according to the World Food Program, "in the poorest countries, school feeding programs are emerging as a common social safety net." Food is the critical tool for improving education, reducing the birth rate and helping in the fight against AIDS. The McGovern-Dole international school nutrition program must be expanded to reach all eligible children.

In the next 50 years, according to Dr. Norman Borlaug, winner of the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize, "the world's farmers and ranchers will be called upon to produce more food than has been produced in the past 10,000 years combined and to do so in environmentally sustainable ways."

The world can meet this extraordinary challenge, but only if all the available tools are utilized. Kofi Annan, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, with the support of the Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, has formed the Alliance for the Green Revolution in Africa, AGRA. It is an African-led partnership to help farmers lift the continent out of poverty and hunger. It is a model that should be followed and supported ([www.agra-alliance.org](http://www.agra-alliance.org)).

The bottom line is this: It is time to move beyond pitting organic agriculture against sustainable agriculture and commercial agriculture. American agriculture is one of the major strengths of the national economy. Consumers enjoy the benefits of American agriculture not just on Thanksgiving but every day. Let's stop vilifying America's farmers and ranchers, and the industrialization of our food supply, and seek a more thoughtful, science-based discussion of

agriculture policy.

We must respectfully disagree, therefore, with the popular book "In Defense of Food." In the book, its author Michael Pollan, the gifted writer from Berkeley, states "that the chronic diseases that now kill most of us can be traced directly to the industrialization of our food" and urges consumers "to reject the advice of science."

One of the downsides of our agricultural efficiency is so few Americans currently farm that consumers have grown more distant from the farm and what it takes to feed the world. Consumers don't understand where food comes from or what it takes to get it from the farm to our kitchen table. When Thanksgiving was first celebrated, virtually everyone farmed. By 1900 only one-third of the American work force farmed; today it takes less than 2 percent of the American work force to feed the country and part of the world.

Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack is working hard to teach consumers more about their food and has started a program called "Know Your Farmer." It is not just a slogan but a serious idea. Today, as we give thanks, it is a good day to start.

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*George McGovern was senator from South Dakota and the Democratic nominee for president of the United States in 1972. Marshall Matz, former counsel to the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, is the founding chairman of Friends of the World Food Program.*