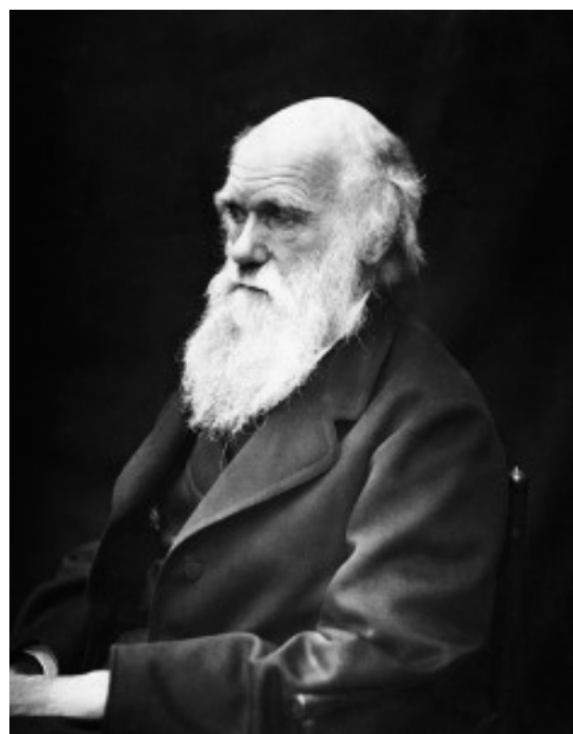


On the Origin of a Hunger-Free Species By Means of Enforceable Natural Law

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“Portrait of Charles Darwin” by J. Cameron. PD-US, accessed via Wikimedia Commons.

Had Charles Darwin been blessed with precognition while conjecturing about finch beak differentiation over millions of years, he would have envied us. We in the early twenty-first century — within a single lifetime — can observe homo sapiens evolving a transformative new trait with unprecedented strength through the international justice system.

Contrary to common perceptions of his work “On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection,” Darwin’s view of evolution was not confined to biology alone. In his later book, “The Descent of Man,” he entertained a broader view that included the ways in which more fortunate humans treat the less fortunate, contending, “The aid we feel impelled to give to the helpless is mainly an incidental result of the instinct of sympathy, which was originally acquired as part of the social instincts...”

It’s a safe bet, therefore, that Darwin would have taken great interest in the emergence of the International Food Security Treaty (IFST), an initiative of international law that could equip humanity to eradicate hunger, the world’s most widespread and severe form of suffering.

While the principles of the IFST are summarized below, those unfamiliar with it are strongly encouraged to read the definitive case for it laid out in “The Armless Hand: The Call for Anti-Hunger

Law and the International Food Security Treaty,” in the Yale Journal of International Affairs. The objective here is to report on the Treaty’s progress, problems, and prospects, which offer valuable insights on the natural growth patterns of international law as it evolves in the age of globalization.

Hunger Paradigm Shifting

In the modern era, evolutionary change in human behavior often begins in a crisis that triggers a mutation of mindset in the general public (and eventually its official leaders), ultimately becoming fixed in new legal structures — in other words, as Abraham Lincoln called upon his fellow citizens to do in facing a great crisis in the nineteenth century, we “think anew and act anew.” But in facing the even deadlier crisis of world hunger today, fresh thinking about hunger has been stifled by the paradigm we grow up with that hunger is just part of the human condition.

We cannot act or even think anew while fabricating a perception of a disability for ourselves where none exists. It is inconsistent with the lessons of history to define our potential by our past limitations or failures. As infants we are not so deluded — even though we’ve spent our entire lives to date unable to take a single step, in time we sense that we can stand up and walk, and get on with it. Nonetheless, some fifteen to eighteen years later, most of us develop some mental paralysis from an infectious hunger paradigm.

This mind-induced incapacity was painfully depicted in an essay by George Packer in the New York Times Sunday Magazine on April 21, 2002, in which he proclaimed, “You’ve been exposed to one corner of human misery, but you’ve done nothing about it. Nor will you. You feel — perhaps without being conscious of it — an impotent guilt, and your helplessness makes you irritated and resentful, almost as if it’s the fault of those thousand Nigerians for becoming your burden. We carry around the mental residue of millions of suffering human beings for whom we’ve done nothing.”

Packer’s reference to the psychological millstone borne by humanity while allowing mass starvation to continue is spot-on. It’s a self-imposed curse, impairing our ability to see how hunger really affects the starving — and the well-fed — and how to end it. But his claim that we will do nothing about it is dead wrong.

The paradigm of hopelessness before hunger is at odds with the facts and is psychologically debilitating, as it mires society’s humanitarian impulses in a guilt-ridden succession of too little-too late fractional measures resulting in millions of hunger-related deaths annually and nearly a billion people trying desperately to survive undernourishment.

Pinioning readers of the New York Times with the prediction that they will do nothing about severe hunger spreads the infection identified by some teenagers in the novel *Upsurge* as AADS—the Acceptance of Avoidable Death and Suffering, “the disease that cripples the spirit of whoever’s got it and the body of somebody else.” AADS is no joke.

AADS kills far more than AIDS and afflicts about twenty times as many people overall. There is no death more avoidable than death from hunger. Hunger isn't lung cancer. As a public health problem, hunger is less daunting than the common cold, because there's a preventive regimen and cure for it called food and experts agree that there's more than enough of it to go around, and that governments have long had the ability to end hunger.

The Limited Glory of Limited Declarations

They have had it at least since 1948, when freedom from hunger was declared a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But AADS has vitiated the will of the world's governments and blinded their vision to the point that they settle for swiping at the edges of hunger with half-hearted development and emergency food aid programs.

It is a dismaying performance, since everyone knows that powerful nations can muster a formidable way when there's a will. Try to imagine them lazily shrugging at terrorism and chalking it up to the human condition if there were a 9/11 scale attack every three and a quarter hours since 2001, plus hundreds of thousands more attacks, each with 3,000 victims who, instead of being killed, were crippled by illness.

Yet substitute malnutrition for terrorist hijackings, and you've got a real-world nightmare of just those proportions. Numerically, the casualties far exceed those wrought by the Nazis in the Holocaust. More deaths are caused by hunger each year than from war and crime put together. The well-fed experience collateral damage as well since high death rates lead to high birth rates and overpopulation, with its spinoffs, environmental damage and political instability.

At some level, most people can sense the speciousness of the helplessness paradigm, which is why, more and more, people have begun to ask "What's wrong with this picture?"

One valuable clue comes from Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen, who has pointed out that in the modern era, people don't starve unless someone wants them to. This is illustrated by the siege the Assad government is presently laying to the city of Madaya, Syria.

Another indicator comes from the late, renowned epidemiologist Geoffrey Rose, who pointed out that the primary determinants of disease are economic and social, and so must be its remedies.

Trying to deal with hunger without the social tool of law is as pointless as trying to build a wooden home without a hammer or saw. As it did with the abolition of slavery and the enfranchisement of women, history is making plain that any realistic hope of eliminating hunger will require commitments to enforceable law.

In common parlance — and common sense — law implies enforceability. Enforcement-free law is temptingly inexpensive, but nobody is lobbying for dropping enforcement for the laws against double-parking, armed robbery, or rape.

When we want a law to mean business, we include an ax everyone can see. But ax-phobic governments at the 1996 World Food Summit, including and especially the United States, neglected to strengthen the right to food in law, opting instead for yet another aspirational declaration and a plan of action that called for cutting the number of hungry in half by 2015 from the 1992 baseline, recently recalculated to have totaled more than one billion. Given that faint call to arms, it's no wonder that the most recent data from the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported the number of chronically hungry to be about 800 million.

A goal has to be envisioned if it's going to be achieved. Government leaders cannot keep their eyes on a prize they can't or won't see — more is the pity when that prize is the fulfillment of natural law long ingrained in human culture and conscience.

The concept of natural law arose centuries ago to describe rights that are axiomatically inalienable and universal. Foremost among these is the right of freedom from hunger, the only human right described as fundamental in the carefully worded International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1966. This convention is an offshoot of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was adopted by the United Nations in 1948 without a single dissenting vote.

However, high-minded nonbinding declarations can't get the job done. They resemble laws, but they're ridden with enforcement-free loopholes big enough to bulldoze more than twenty thousand emaciated corpses every day. Consigning this most "natural" of rights to the wilderness of neglect imposes a deadly tax that the economically least fortunate among us continue to pay with their lives every day, all the while stunting our growth as a species and the prospects for peace, justice, and prosperity of the world at large.

This is not a dig against declarations, which can prove valuable. Speaking of the right of equality proclaimed in the American Declaration of Independence, Abraham Lincoln said "The drafters ... did not mean to assert the obvious untruth that all were then actually enjoying equality ... They meant simply to declare the right so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit."

The International Food Security Treaty

One-sixth of the way through the twenty-first century, circumstances do permit enforcement of the right to freedom from hunger through enactment of the proposed International Food Security Treaty, which aims to generate a strong global commitment to fulfill the human right of freedom from hunger and to protect it with enforceable international law.

The draft treaty, about 700 words, can be reviewed at treaty.org. It distills down to four basic principles. Each signatory is obliged:

- 1) to *guarantee at least minimal nutrition* for people within its borders who can't get access to it on their own
- 2) to *contribute to a world food reserve and resource center* for any nation needing emergency help to meet that guarantee
- 3) to *establish and enforce law* against the use of hunger as a weapon, and
- 4) to *support UN food security enforcement actions* if it's proven that any nation is unable or unwilling to enforce that law on its own.

There's a realistic path for moving forward, laid out in an article titled "Law as Catalyst in the Eradication of Hunger" in Bread for the World's "Hunger 2000 Report."

Phase 1 of the treaty's evolution built an overpowering case for the treaty with support from experts and visionary leaders in government. Now we have entered Phase 2, where the treaty must be formalized by governments and facilitated by the United Nations. Later phases will focus on gathering ratifications, establishing the treaty infrastructure, and pushing for universal adoption and compliance. Universality is the goal, but the treaty could yield striking results along the way. Realized commitments from just a third of the world's nations could drastically reduce hunger and in turn increase the momentum for universality.

Readers seeking to evaluate the practicality of this plan should look at statements of seasoned realists in politics, human rights, international law, and anti-hunger organizations at treaty.org. These include statements by Amartya Sen and the former UN official who led the global response to the Sudan famine in the 1980s, who describes the IFST as potentially "the centerpiece of a whole system by which the capacity of the Earth to feed its people is translated into a real commitment to do something, because there's no fundamental need for hunger now," and many others who would echo the statement of US Congressional Hunger Caucus Co-Chair Jim McGovern at a 2004 Congressional briefing, that the IFST is "doable."

The IFST doesn't snag itself in arguments about any nation's borders, trade or agriculture policies, or military arsenals. It should dramatically increase regional and international stability, for, as Dwight Eisenhower told the 1956 Republican convention, "It is madness to suppose that there could be an island of tranquility and prosperity in a sea of wretchedness and frustration." The past year has demonstrated forcefully that the mere perception of Europe as an island of tranquility and prosperity has lain threat to those very qualities, since many of the hundreds of thousands of wretched and frustrated who have washed up on Europe's shores, dead and alive, were attempting to escape hunger and extreme poverty.

The IFST won't end poverty, but it could end poverty's worst consequences.

It won't end war, but it will sharply reduce the use of hunger as a weapon of war, and absent that weapon, some wars may end much sooner or never even start.

It won't end anti-Western terrorism, but if championed by Western powers, it will disinfect much of the hateful poison expelled into the atmosphere by terrorists attempting to depict the West as busting its buttons in self-satisfaction.

It won't be free, but for a tiny fraction of the trillion-dollar cost of the war to dispossess Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction, the treaty will burnish to unprecedented luster the images of the nations that galvanize a coalition of the willing to end hunger — and what cost it does entail will be shared by a great many nations.

Acting on Inaction

To be realized, the treaty's stovepipe narrow focus on eliminating starvation and malnutrition — probably the most common shared ideal among all the world's religions — needs only the kind of will to action that was summoned to get rid of polio. In 1988, decades after the polio vaccines were developed, polio was still attacking a thousand more children every day. But that year, anti-polio campaigners reshaped the mindset at the World Health Assembly and got them to move on the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, and within 15 years, new cases of polio dropped by 99.8 percent.

Food Security Treaty backers should be pleased to learn that the IFST can be made successful by following the core eight-word prescription for social change: pressure governments and get others to do likewise.

Those with credentials in hunger, law, international relations, politics, or religion can quickly put their credentials to work advancing the treaty by speaking up on its behalf. Many politicians need such blue-ribbon stamps of approval to feel less vulnerable to complaints from political extremes, like hammer-headed critiques of far leftists who see phantoms of US imperialism everywhere they look or those of far rightists who claim that hunger eradication would be too costly, or would overpopulate the world, or reward the lazy, or some other let-them-eat-cake excuse for involuntary manslaughter parading as pragmatic laissez-faire economics.

History has shown over and over that political “leaders” often need to be led by their constituents to put their muscle into social progress. The ease of remaining immersed in the status quo — and the time-crunching demands, in the United States at least, of fundraising for their re-elections — engenders a thudding litany of excuses for inaction. Even some who are certain hunger eradication should be pursued may hide in a marsh of exaggerated risk scenarios while a few of their colleagues lay tracks, thinking they might later jump on a train if it comes rolling by.

Some may evade action on the treaty’s broad principles by smugly trotting out the old saying that the devil is in the details. Sometimes the devil is in the details, but often the devil lies in that saying itself when it’s used as an excuse for political cowardice or defending the status quo. Fainthearted silence, fronting as judicious caution, can inflict enormous delays upon progressive social change, even a change as long desired in the human heart as ending hunger.

Meanwhile, some people outside of government are likely to object that feeding the starving will increase the global population. Setting aside the gruesome implication that people holding such concerns are okay with mass death by starvation to alleviate population pressures, they should be relieved to learn that nearly all nations with very high birth rates do not see them decline until their similarly high death rates come down. That is why Zero Population Growth was one of the earliest organizations to back the IFST.



"A farmer prepares his field for the planting season near Nthenje on the outskirts of Lilongwe, Malawi. Australia is using its expertise and experience to help improve food security in African countries." by Stephen Morrison/AusAID. CC-BY 2.0, accessed via Wikimedia Commons.

Opportunities for Synergy Missed and Seized

Groups with overlapping aims for reckoning with hunger have sometimes engaged in counterproductive opposition, even though working synergistically might bring about a more swift and drastic reduction in hunger. One embarrassing cause for this in some cases was cited by World Hunger Year Magazine in the 1990s — institutional dependency on hunger's continued existence.

Another infrequent but more visible objection to the IFST in particular has arisen from efforts to stretch the treaty to encompass additional issues not included in the treaty's principles, in an effort to extend the binding commitment the IFST aims to secure for hunger eradication to other missions. But the IFST is "doable" in part because it avoids entanglement in some controversial issues that will nonetheless ultimately be helped by its success. The treaty's exclusive focus on eliminating starvation and malnutrition resonates with the universal, gut-wrenching sympathy people have felt for the starving throughout history — a condition it will need to override governments' resistance to binding

international commitments. Fine points of trade agreements, sustainable agriculture and development policies, and limitations on genetically modified foods are not found in the Bible or any other sacred texts. Alleviating the agony of the hungry is called for in virtually all of them

Besides, the treaty's success should reap great dividends for other anti-hunger initiatives from many UN agencies and food security NGOs. Politicians and taxpayers would begin to recognize hunger eradication as an investment with a handsome payoff in political, economic, and environmental stability — with the psychological and spiritual bonus of having accomplished a humanitarian miracle.

A sterling example of the recognition of the potential for such collaboration may be found with the Right to Food Team working at the UN in concert with the Committee on World Food Security and the Food and Agriculture Organization at the United Nations. This unit was set up in 2006 to promote a wide-ranging set of initiatives set forth in a document called the "Voluntary Guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security."

Early attempts at collaboration with the IFST Campaign were rebuffed by a couple of staffers in the Right to Food unit who failed to see the advantages of complementarity between the treaty and the Voluntary Guidelines. But the more recent appointment of Juan Carlos Garcia y Cebolla, a visionary from Spain, as the new leader of the Right to Food Team, dramatically changed the equation. Recognizing how the IFST could clear space for wider global adoption of the Voluntary Guidelines, Garcia y Cebolla worked hard to secure a presentation of the IFST as a side event to the formal intergovernmental meetings at the 2015 annual plenary session of the Committee on World Food Security, thus cracking open a doorway to future collaboration that had been previously locked tight.

Thus, as with so many longterm social justice campaigns, persistence furthered. Advocates for the IFST and the whole host of food security initiatives should realize that we are bound together in a symbiotic dynamic. Our efforts shall either languish or flourish together.

Evolving Evolution

The International Food Security Treaty has the same synergy of common sense, inherent morality, and hard law that ended slavery and guaranteed women's suffrage. The activists who achieved those victories had to upend huge economic and social structures that millions thought should continue forever, and they did it with no Universal Declaration or scripture to stand on, nor broadcasting, cell phones, or Internet. IFST advocates have none of those problems and all of those tools to obliterate a horror no one says should continue.

There was a time when a respected essayist could less egregiously pontificate that we will do nothing to lift ourselves from unhappy passivity about world hunger, for there was no feasible solution in sight. But that time has passed, rendered archaic by the IFST, the offspring of a marriage of practicality and vision which cuts no slack for the perverse comfort of pessimism. The recent Internet release of the mythic animated short film Thunder Head Clearing will, over time, spread awareness of the Treaty's power to catalyze hunger eradication so far as to embarrass anyone who would contemplate coating an unfounded generalization that we're all AADS victims with the lacquer of expert opinion.



"Patiently Waiting for Food Aid in Bamako Mali" by DFID – UK Department for International Development. CC BY 2.0, accessed via Wikimedia Commons

That's good news for human rights and global peace, for as Dianne Feinstein, Vice-Chair of the United States Senate Intelligence Committee, has written, the IFST "could become a major element in stimulating global action to eradicate starvation and in strengthening the international justice system." It's long been in the cards that the support for the human right of freedom from hunger would spearhead the advance of human rights towards protection by enforced national and international law, for access to food alone is both an absolute necessity for life and the target of the most inhumane form of mass destruction. No other moral principle of social organization is so deeply rooted in the spiritual culture of civilization as the call to rescue the starving.

Anyone dubious about the odds of such a radical improvement in world affairs occurring any time soon should consider that, in the childhoods of many of today's young adults, the Soviet Union and apartheid appeared as immutable as the Rock of Gibraltar. Those now beginning to speak of the IFST could instigate a flow of awareness and support that will spread to other regions, to religious communities, markets, water coolers, and news media and other countries all over the world and ultimately wrestle hunger to the ground. In fifteen years, malnutrition could follow polio's path to a 99.8 percent reduction with consequent declines in population growth and environmental pressures. Hundreds of millions of healthy working people would escape the stunting of their bodies, lives, and spirits. And the well-fed would escape the thundercloud of guilt we now live under, gagging on the shaky claim that the world hunger plague will always be with us.

Paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was right to point to Vladimir Vernadsky's concept of the world's collective mindset — the "noosphere" — as a critical element in present-day evolution, but his description of human consciousness as "evolution looking at itself" fell short. No longer just powerless observers of evolution, we can employ the IFST to switch on our own social justice gene and render it dominant over the atavistic acceptance of avoidable mass misery. Unlike finches, we have evolved our own species, through sheer will and brainpower, and may now choose to become the first hunger-free intelligent species in the known universe. Nature has made us an offer too good to refuse.