



Putting Hunger into a Global Context through Student-to-Student Interaction

By Ed Gragert

Students of Deanne McBeath, a third grade teacher in New Jersey, are exploring the root causes of hunger with students in Bangladesh, Nigeria, Lebanon, Trinidad & Tobago, Pakistan, Canada and other parts of the US. They are engaged collaboratively in interactive surveys on the existence and scale of poverty and hunger around the world, descriptions of what a typical school lunch looks like (finding that there is no lunch option at some schools) and learning about food distribution patterns and what countries determine those patterns. This global interaction is part of the “Finding Solutions to Hunger” project developed by Kids Can Make a Difference, a program within iEARN (International Education and Resource Network).

Someone asked me recently why students should undertake such an online collaborative project when the issues involved in global hunger are so huge and difficult for persons so young to actually play a role in.

Although the project is just now getting off the ground, based on earlier projects in the iEARN network, we can surmise positive outcomes in which students can know that when they act on awareness, they will make a difference. Clearly, all too often issues of this nature are considered to be so large as to overwhelm most students. I have heard students ask themselves: “If the “experts” have not been able to eradicate hunger, how can I as a 12 or 17 year old middle or high school student even hope to get a grasp on the issue, much less actually affect change”. Indeed, the statistics are staggering and numbing:

According to the UN:

- Hunger is the world’s No. 1 health risk, killing more people every year than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined
- One in seven people in the world will go to bed hungry tonight
- One of four children in developing countries are underweight
- There are more hungry people in the world than the combined populations of USA, Canada and the European Union
- 65% of the world’s hungry live in only seven countries: India, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and Ethiopia

The statistics on hunger are staggering no matter how old you are or how you look at them. With the global population on track to [hit seven billion](#) by the end of the year, the

problem seems even more imminent. So, what's to be done? Giving the hungry the means to obtain the food they need is the ultimate donation—through production and influence over its distribution.

Peter Rosset, while Co-Director of the Institute for Food and Development Policy, raised the question at the World Food Summit in 2002: What went wrong? He then went on to note: “The current Summit [World Food Summit: Fives Years Later] was called by the United Nations to examine why hunger persists despite the 1996 Plan of Action. Progress has lagged by at least 60% behind the goals for the first five years, and today conditions are worsening in much of the world. Without a drastic reorientation of policies, it will be impossible to meet the 2015 goal, and hunger may actually increase. While official documents prepared for the meeting decry a ‘lack of will’ and call for ‘more resources’ to be directed at reducing hunger, the fact is that more fundamental changes are needed.”

He pointed out: “At 3:00 AM on Monday morning, the United States (in 2002) stood alone among all nations of the world in blocking further discussion of the draft text of the declaration that governments would sign at the World Food Summit. What was leading the U.S. to stop the all night negotiating session? First, **the U.S. wanted all references to ‘food as a human right’ to be deleted**, and second, the U.S. wanted strong language saying that genetically modified (GM) crops are a key way to end hunger. The Third World nations organized in the Group of 77 wanted mandatory language on the right to food, while Europe and Canada held out for the compromise of a voluntary Code of Conduct. No other nation felt strongly that GM crops should receive prominence.”

Through this interactive online project, young people working together in different countries do not leave issues like hunger and food distribution to the experts to solve, believing instead that they have a role to play in both understanding the root causes of the issue and in its resolution.

One of the first activities of the project is to for students to examine their own eating patterns, keeping food diaries of what they eat each day and researching the caloric intake and nutritional value. They compare their own diaries with other students around the world, observing differences and dialoging about them.

They then move on to discuss how food is distributed globally and look at the difference between famine and chronic hunger. Someone may well point out that food distribution systems are defined and determined by “market economies” that can create a demand for specialized foods, leading local farmers to switch to crops for export, rather than for local consumption. By going through a collaborative process of inquiry-based learning, they themselves explore, research and “discover” causes of hunger.

They are asked to research and discuss the role of climate change on agriculture, looking at different regions of the world and patterns over recent decades in changes in the amount of land that is being used for food production. Research leads them to observe that over-farming, chemical fertilizers and weather changes are making land less

productive and subject to damage by natural causes (too little rainfall, flooding over land that cannot support vegetation, etc.).

Students examine how their own consumption patterns contribute to reduction of the planet's resources. They analyze their lifestyle patterns to determine their own personal role in affecting the ability of the planet to sustain the current level of consumption and resource use. The "OF2 – Our Footprints, Our Future" project enables youth worldwide to calculate how many planets it would take if everyone lived their lifestyle. They gain perspectives on the affect climate change is having on the amount of location of both arable land and where it's being depleted by urban growth, desertification and change from agriculture to animal grazing. But, more importantly, the project enables students to set specific and measurable goals to change their lifestyle and reach a collective goal of reducing greenhouse gasses by 100,000 tons by the end of the year. 118,000 young people have come together to say they can meet this goal, and as of October 2011 have effectively eliminated 80,000 tons of greenhouse gases. Not stopping there, students dialogue globally about the reasons for different carbon footprints and grasp that by working together, connected with technology, they can have an exponential impact.

The next area of study is to learn about why people are hungry. Food First, the Institute for Food and Development Policy, has an updated article "12 Myths About Hunger" based on Frances Moore Lappe's *World Hunger: 12 Myths*, that can be used as background material. Also, *Finding Solutions to Hunger* has great lessons to use. Here, students discover the problem is not scarcity, but distribution; they will look at issues of population growth, the legacy of colonialism, foreign aid, importance of female education, and the impact of the media.

A student in Trinidad & Tobago or other country may point to a study that reports that when women have more secure ownership over land, hunger is impacted because women produce between 60-80 percent of the food in rural Africa, but laws often allow male relatives to take away their land. [Laws that protect their right to property](#) can therefore play an important role in reducing hunger and ensuring access to a dependable food supply. This may well spark a lively discussion about the role of gender in food production and distribution.

Inevitably, a student in Pakistan or Bangladesh will note that US agribusinesses, out of their desire to protect and market its genetically modified grains and other produce, have patented the seeds, making it impossible for locally sustainable farmers to compete using traditional agricultural methods or buy the genetically modified seeds. The names of Monsanto and Zeneca are frequently mentioned by students in other countries, causing US students to look locally for companies that are connected to hunger.

Finally, Deanne's students will join others around the world in local projects to educate their school and community about the issue of hunger and how people can effect change—documenting their projects through video or digital photography so it can be shared online, reaching exponential numbers of other young people.

Through collective resource-gathering and perspectives from around the world, students in the “Finding Solutions to Hunger Project” have the opportunity to go beyond an examination of what is hunger to look at root causes. Further, they are not given the answers—they explore the questions together and, with facilitation from educators, take responsibility for their own learning and explore solutions. Through the use of technologies in education, students can go beyond this to join their peers in other countries in collective action based on the research and discussion they have done together. This is the true value of the partnership between Kids Can make a Difference and iEARN. And this is how I respond to those who question the value of students working on so huge an issue as global hunger.

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