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Poverty/World Hunger

Sustainable Poverty

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By Paul Harris
Apr 18, 2004,
16:52

April 18, 2004 - "Look at a photo or TV screen, at these prostrate children, all bones, saggy skin, bulging eyes and belly, and you are overwhelmed at the misery. You know the children you are looking at are dead by the time you see them. Look at another scene, especially in the picturesque pages of the *National Geographic*, and you marvel at the smiles and vigor of the dancers or traders in an exotic landscape. The [African] continent bears witness to hope and hopelessness, courage and despair. Circumstances are appalling, but somehow, people find ways to cope, to survive, die, yet multiply. In the long sweep of history, this is the heart of the matter: down is not out." (economist David Landes)

Landes is right; people do find ways to cope. But I suspect that if there is not a massive overhaul of the way we live life, those of us who are doing alright are not going to be happy about how those desperate people will eventually be driven to cope.

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As I cruised down the road a while back on the outskirts of the city nearest to where I live, it occurred to me that the skin around most North American cities is identical. Miles of neon and fast take-out joints selling what they purport to be food; rapidly disappearing countryside that often ravages the good crop land that attracted people to those areas in the first place. I stopped into the first handy Chew 'n Puke to use the washroom and as I congratulated myself again on not succumbing to the advertising that assured me I could get a good meal here, it occurred me there are people all over the world more than willing to eat this slop just to get something into their bellies.

The poor will always be with us. That's because the rich will always ensure they are with us; you can't be rich unless you've got more money or property or stuff than others, and the more others there are, the more chipper you can feel about the whole thing. I'm self-employed and I often struggle to get by, to pay the bills and put food on the table. But it is always a sobering reality for me that to the majority of the people on this planet, I am fabulously wealthy.

When mankind first leaped down out of the trees (and don't get me started about whether that was a mistake), the rich were the guys with the biggest sticks who were able to kill the most animals, get the best furs, control their cave-mates by exercising their power. They were able to accumulate more, to decide who else got to eat and who didn't, they got the best choice of everything.

And haven't we come a long way

since then? There is no need for poverty; there is no need for hunger; there is no need for many illnesses; there is no need for refugees from anything other than nature; there is no need for thousands of charitable organizations whose mandate is to beg for assistance for sick or impoverished souls around the world. There is more than enough food to feed everyone on Earth, there is more than enough medicine to treat people who needlessly die from readily curable sickness, there is more than enough money to ensure that no one misses the basic necessities of life.

The combined military budgets of the world's nations is greater than the amount of money necessary to feed everybody. In fact, the military budget of just the biggest spender is enough. We spend far more money in trying to cull our numbers by various conflicts than we do in trying to ensure the survival of our species. We all know the upshot of that, even those among us who don't care to admit it: we are phenomenally stupid. It makes you wonder how we ever survived those early days when we first stepped out of the bushes and lifted our knuckles from the ground.

There is also no way those hungry or dispossessed or sick people will ever get a meaningful share of the world's resources until such time as: they rise up and take it from the rest of us; or we exercise some basic compassion and start to redistribute the assets of the planet so that everyone can thrive. It seems to me that the survival instincts of the few who have the most should lead them to taking some sort of pre-emptive steps to

remove the need for the masses of humanity to rise up and kill them. For that is surely what is going to happen without some meaningful reforms of this planet and our behaviour.

This issue becomes so difficult for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is that most of us are greedy and self-centred and really don't care about anyone outside of our own small circle. There aren't very many Mother Teresa's and I'm not even sure she lived up to her legend.

A few years back, a bunch of musicians got together and made a recording to earn money for famine relief in Ethiopia. I don't know how much good it did but it certainly made people feel like they were doing something to help. Prior to that, former Beatle George Harrison had done something similar to help starving people in Bangladesh and to his utter disappointment, the money raised took years to reach the people who needed it and not before being filtered off by accountants and lawyers.

Various aid groups around the world compete with each other for funds but how many of those dollars ever get to the people in need is highly suspect. Even in the world's most prosperous country there is poverty. In a 1962 book called *The Other America*, Michael Harrington wrote about who the people were that the government's own reports considered to be poor. He estimated 50 million Americans were impoverished but even if his numbers are inaccurate, there is no doubt that there are a sizable number of poor people in America. They don't all live in ghettos, either.

How can the richest country in history fail to provide for its people in need?

Poverty is hunger; it is lack of shelter; it is being sick and not able to see a doctor; it is being unable to go to school; it is being unable to read; it is not having a job, it is fear for the future, it is powerlessness, it is lack of freedom. And it is everywhere. In 1998, the World Bank estimated that, using what they call 'Purchasing Power Parity' (PPP) to compare nation to nation, some 1.2 billion people world-wide lived on less than \$1 per day — that's about 24% of the population of the developing world; and 2.8 billion lived on less than \$2 per day.

Do I need to tell you how obscene that is?? Do I need to warn you that if those people get hungry enough, they will eventually have no choice but to come after the rest of us? And there are a lot of them, many more than there are of us. Even if we don't care about them, self-preservation alone should make us want to throw them a bone.

But almost all of us come from one religious tradition or another where one of the basic tenets of the faith is charity and caring for your fellow man. There are very few of us who could say with any legitimacy that we live life that way.

"Jo lives --- that is to say, Jo has not yet died --- in a ruinous place [in] a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all the decent people; where ... tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that

crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in every footprint". (from Bleak House, by Charles Dickens)

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Mr. Harris also writes for Yellow Times and covers DRC for News From The Front. Members of the UN Global Security office have also subscribed to it.

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