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John McArthur on Ending Hunger

In this podcast edition of *Foreign Affairs Unedited*, John McArthur discusses strategies to end world hunger and his recent article, "[The Hunger Game](#) [1]," with *Foreign Affairs* Staff Editor Nikita Lalwani.

This interview has been edited and condensed. A rush transcript is below.

Nikita Lalwani: John, thank you so much for joining us today.

John McArthur: Thanks for having me.

Lalwani: In May, the United Nations reported that in the past 25 years, the number of hungry people globally has declined from one billion to about 795 million despite a surge in population growth. What should be our biggest takeaway from the report?

McArthur: I guess the way I look at it is really two points. One is that progress is real, there are huge positive dynamics, and at the same time, there's a heck of a lot more to be achieved. So if the world has gone from around 23% of the developing world living in hunger down to around 13%, that's roughly cutting it by half over 25 years. That's big progress but that 795 million people is still a big number, too big by far. But as you say, the population growth is significant in many parts of the world, and if you look at South Asia, big decline from around 24% of the population down to 16%. But the absolute number is still stagnant at around 280 million people, so that's huge.

And more worryingly, in a sense, sub-Saharan Africa has had progress. Many people would be surprised but it's actually had significant progress, around 33% to 23% in hunger, at which adds up to around 220 million people now. But that number, 'cause the population growth is still so fast in Africa, is actually growing by around three million people a year.

Lalwani: So you've written that if the world is to end hunger by 2030, it will need to make much, much faster progress. How much faster?

McArthur: The simplest way to think about it, I think, is to take stock on where we've been coming from and where we need to get to. So in the past generation we've been seeing roughly a one percentage point decline in hunger every three years. We need to triple that pace, so we're making around a one percentage point decline every year. So that's three times times as fast, that's a big jump but it's not impossible, especially when you think about the fact that there already is so much momentum in so many parts of the world.

Lalwani: Well, you just said that you've singled out Brazil for its progress in ending hunger, what, in your mind, has been the biggest factor in its success?

McArthur: The biggest factor is that they attacked the problem from so many angles. It was the opposite of a silver bullet strategy. It was led from the very top by President Lula himself. He came to office with this zero hunger promise and they thought about it from so many angles and they addressed it from so many angles. It was about the small farms plus the big farms, plus the safety nets, plus the nutrition, plus the research and the science. And that's so important, especially this part of the small farms and the big farms. I think they tripled their number of small farms they were supporting at the same time as they were supporting the big agri business. And a lot of people think this is an either or proposition. Is it the big farms or the little guys?

And what we saw there is that they supported these small farms not just to boost productivity, but to get basic safety nets and make sure that there was access to better food availability, and that was such an important piece of this. In addition to, in the urban areas, better safety nets and this notion of income and adequacy of good food in addition to the production of food in general, for marketing and for income, I think was a major piece of the strategy there. And also, it was really underpinned by science over many, many years and a real government support to research and developing techniques, and even crop breeds that would be working well with the local farmers. And so, this multi-pronged strategy really led by the top of the government helped bring a tremendous success.

Lalwani: Are there other countries that have been similarly innovative in tackling hunger?

McArthur: There are a bunch that have seen a lot of success in the past several years, and many from different starting points and each country has its own issues, of course. So Ethiopia is seen as a big success, both for its boost in agriculture investments and very creative way of developing safety nets, whether to provide income support or food support, especially in the lean seasons between crops. Bangladesh is seen as a big success. Similarly, had a huge boost in production, especially in the '80s after the very famous famines of the early '70s. But then also had these major investments in nutrition and health and education, including, of course, for girls. Other countries like Malawi, you've seen in the past decade has had... To many people's surprise, it was called, in 2002 by the head of UNICEF at the time, Carol Bellamy, "the perfect storm". They had the AIDS pandemic, they had malaria, they had year after year of famine every time there was a drought, and they've had huge success in tackling hunger and in improving child survival and in promoting so many basic human aspects of well being by boosting food production, by building the basic clinical services in the communities and this, again, multi-pronged strategy is about not just making sure that there is enough food, but enough health to absorb the food.

Lalwani: On the flipside, have there been countries that you'd single out for making mistakes or dealing with the problem in the wrong way?

McArthur: I don't know if I'd single out any actors, 'cause it's too complicated. But I would single out certain types of behaviors that have been problematic. We've seen, for example, in 2008, there were a lot of countries that during the global food price crisis, erected a lot of trade walls to protect their food supplies. And this had, actually the adverse consequence of pushing food prices even higher. Which makes it on one hand maybe a little bit better for the people who are selling food, but on the other hand for the people who can't afford much food, it makes it much harder. So this is one of the general trends that I think the economists are always trying to push, is make sure that there is enough open trade to buffer the markets and keep the food supplies fluid, while at the same time making sure there is real proper safety nets for the people who can't afford to access the market properly.

Lalwani: Moving forward, the proposed sustainable development goals aim to end hunger globally by 2030. Is that a realistic goal?

McArthur: I think it has to be. I think most people would consider 795 million human beings living in chronic hunger to be unacceptable, unconscionable and a problem that simply needs to get fixed. So the sustainable development goal timeline for 2030, gives a deadline for not cutting the problem by half. Which is roughly what the millennium development goals did in the past 15 years, by taking over this second half to get the job done completely. People ask whether it's realistic, I actually don't like that word very much 'cause I find that it's often used as code for suppressing creativity and ambition in some implicit way; and I think we need to figure out, not, is the current trajectory gonna get us there? 'Cause we know it's not.

We have to ask, well what would it take to get there? How can we think about not the generalities of this issue, but the specific places where this is a problem? What are the barriers to getting better solutions? Another big, big challenge is the fragile and so-called conflict-affected states. My best bet is that that's the hardest problem, is how to tackle hunger and extreme poverty in the fragile states.

Lalwani: Right. So speaking of solutions to these problems, short of ending the endemic conflicts in these areas, are there other things that can be done in the meantime to alleviate hunger in those regions?

McArthur: Even when we look at the conflicts, I think it's important to understand that hunger is often both a cause and a consequence. So there is a lot of terrific evidence, and people like Edward Miguel and his co-authors out of Berkeley have published in the top journals showing how climate variability; when the rains fail and the temperatures go up, the crops fail and people are more likely to fight, and this is extra problematic in farming areas. But it might well be a general universal truth that these climate variabilities have a contributing role in conflicts and violence. And so, one of the first questions is; if we look at the places like the Sahel, for example, the band below the Sahara that's had some of the most extreme climate change in the world in the past four decades, with drop off in precipitation, often increases in temperature, those are often places also that have a lot of persistent conflict or recurrence of conflict. So what do we need to do there? Well, we need to think about things like how to get basic small scale irrigation scaled up, that's not going to happen purely on its own in low income environments.

That needs things like credit expansion vehicles for local entrepreneurs to expand the financing for irrigation. It needs things like support for drought resistant seeds, it needs more access to affordable fertilizer. Really, the basics of things like water, seeds and nutrients that help people grow plants. On the flipside, of course, there is a real need to keep focusing on the peace processes and the toughest cases and to build support. When we look at some examples of success, I looked at Côte d'Ivoire recently, which has had its share of political challenges in the past generation. It's also one of the great success stories of agricultural, it looks, they're first country in Sub-Saharan Africa's history to cross the threshold of 3 tons per hectare average cereal yields in the most recent data. If that statistic turns out to really hold and bear scrutiny, that's a really big deal. So there's both an agricultural success story and a post-conflict success story, and I think we need to be thinking about, you know, what are the lessons from a place like that, a very special economy for a bunch of reasons, but how can we expand those successes elsewhere?

Lalwani: And how can we expand those successes elsewhere?

McArthur: In its very simplest sense, it's about ensuring access to quality food. If we think about Africa, the problem in its simplest sense is about ensuring that there is enough production of food. And in Africa, the production of food has what I would call a "double-barreled opportunity". There's the food side of producing more food in a region where the number one job is still farming but also, there's the income side that when you produce more, you can earn more, and you can buy better things, more diversified crops, and more diversified sources of nutrients. And then, ideally, over time, you could even get a job or earn income off the farm.

And so these are parts of the complexities of food in economic development, but what we see, also, in places like Asia is... And again, Bangladesh, as we talked about before, it's a great example where it really diversified approach to not just boosting food production but thinking about these safety nets. How they can be developed, how the broader packages of health and education services can help boost income opportunities over time, but also minimize the risks of the inability to really absorb the food. And if we can do this, as we've seen so many countries have so many breakthroughs in each of these areas over the past generation, especially in the health sector. I think there's still a good chance that we can be serious about thinking what it looks like to take on this, what has been until now shocking proposition of actually ending hunger within a generation.

Lalwani: You know, the particulars of ending hunger vary from region to region and so the problem in Africa differs from the problem in Asia, the problem in Asia differs from the problems elsewhere. Do the responses need to differ as a result and sort of how? How should the differ?

McArthur: Yeah, I think in each place, the problem has to be matched to the approach. And so, again, there's no single answer to any complex problem and each country has to be taking on these issues of both production, I would say, as a major piece, and not just looking at general production but who's able to produce. Especially in areas where most of the economic activity is in farming and especially small-scale farming. So how can we help the farmers get access to things like water, fertilizer, good seeds? How can they get access to credit for their farms? How can they get access to the market to sell their goods? How can they get access to credit to even move up the value chain and connect with suppliers and supply chains on both sides in a more efficient way? And that's one major piece of the puzzle and that's what most Asian countries did as underpinnings of the economic success at various points in the 20th century and that's a huge piece, in my view, of what still needs to happen in Africa.

Then, globally speaking, this notion of how to implement good safety nets, is a big issue. And by safety nets, I mean really supporting the people who are in the most extreme force of poverty and the people who are vulnerable to shocks, where if someone has to go to the hospital, they have to sell all their assets to pay the bill.

And we've seen an increasing amount of evidence and people like Chris Blattman and others who've been showing that even direct transfers are both getting so cheap and there's growing evidence that they're much more effective than many people would've guessed. It might well be that in 10 or 15 years, who knows where the technology's going to take us, but we can think, actually, about basic emergency income support or vulnerability support through digital transfers to the poorest households in the world. That might, again, sound far-fetched but if we think of how far the world has come in terms of digital technology, mobile banking, digital currencies and everything in the past handful of years, I think that this is

gonna surprise us all with the opportunities on the ability to provide a basic safety net for any human being anywhere in the world.

Lalwani: So there are obviously tons of ways, tons of creative ways to eliminate hunger globally, but you've noted that global interest in ending hunger tends to fluctuate. It ramps up when food prices are high, which thrusts the issue onto policy agendas, but it slows down when food prices are more stable. How can we make ending hunger a more consistent goal?

McArthur: I think one piece of the long-term strategy, we have to be clear, will come from market-based investment. So one of the things I noticed in my own work is after the last food price crisis again in 2008, was a real surge of interest among private investors who wanted to get into the food issue. And my phone started ringing more with people who wanted to learn more about food, who wanted to seek opportunities in food. And we've actually seen an early growth in global foreign direct investment in the agriculture sector. That raises its own complexities for sure and in some cases, major problems. But if done right, I think the role of private investment whether foreign or domestic, will be a crucial bit of this and the market-based dynamics of poverty reduction and tackling the food problem will be central. And so, those are ways that we can't necessarily predict but we can provide incentives in areas where the market-based investment is not showing up.

So those are the types of issues and areas where we might provide more direct, I would say, cushions and incentives for private investors to take more risk. However, what we also need on the public side to do things like that and to take on all the other problems of emergency relief and support for things like the transport infrastructure that will get the costs down to help farmers and consumers access markets better, is major public investment in infrastructure. And I would say in things like the irrigation schemes that might need larger scale investment and in many places, price support to make sure that there's, again, a cushion. But price supports are a tricky thing and need to be done well. In most successful cases that is the case of course that if we're gonna provide safety nets for individuals that has to be over the long-term. And I think we need a new approach to thinking about long-term global investments in this issue.

What we've seen is that there's been a boost when there's a political push or political crisis but there's not really a clear way to track accountability on those commitments and there's not really a way to match investments to goals. And I think that's the second piece is to really match with the long-term investment strategy we need goal-oriented institutions that feel very accountable for the achievement of various pieces of this puzzle, both at the national level and at the global level. And then if we have those two premises of long-term strategies and very accountable institutions, we're I think in for much more practical strategies. The G7 made a major commitment at their most recent summit in Germany of helping 500 million people get out of hunger by 2030. The big question is, well, how?

And that's a great commitment and evidently, was a personal commitment of Chancellor Merkel herself to her great credit but now there's the how-to question, which needs a very serious partnership strategy in each of the countries where those 500 million people might live. And that's where to take on these complexities, it's gotta be locally owned, locally driven but backed by external support. And if we can think about these things so that we're having the check-ins every few years and everyone's watching and knows what to watch for, I think that this can actually break the back of it because at its deepest level, the notion of actually approaching a finish line on this topic and similarly, the end of extreme poverty, so called "dollar a day poverty", which is deeply interwoven, I actually think the fact that that has

become a viable proposition over the next generation is motivating enough that common sense will drive the world to the right solutions.

Lalwani: John, thanks so much for taking the time to talk to us. This was extremely informative.

McArthur: Thank you so much. What a pleasure.

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