NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

A new look at hunger

Julien Carriere | Sep. 29, 2010

Book measures and maps who goes hungry

THE ATLAS OF WORLD HUNGER
By Thomas J. Bassett and Alex Winter-Nelson
Published by University of Chicago Press, $45

When I sat down to review this book, I had just returned from a three-week trip to East Africa, where I saw lions hunting successfully, wildebeest crossing the Mara River -- not always successfully -- along with the astonishing diversity of plant and animal species found on the world?s oldest continent. I met fascinating people, including Maasai and Samburu tribesmen and picked up a smattering of Swahili.

The poverty in the cities and towns was evident but nowhere did I see the hunger that is ravaging so much of that region of Africa.

No, that sad realization came as I was reading *The Atlas of World Hunger* by Thomas J. Bassett and Alex Winter-Nelson. With this book, Bassett and Winter-Nelson are bringing worldwide hunger out of hiding.

The book begins with a striking juxtaposition of people worlds apart. There is an Ethiopian farmer?s plight paired to that of an unemployed mother in Louisville, Ky. What they have in common is poverty: Each can afford only one meal a day. This is the ?uneven geography of hunger? the authors illustrate as they make the undeniable link between poverty and hunger in the richest and poorest countries of the world.

The atlas seeks to answer two questions, ?Where are the hungry?? and ?Why are they hungry?? while developing a nuanced reply to a third, ?Is hunger inevitable??

The book is divided into two parts.

Part I provides a wide-ranging overview of the most common indicators used to measure world hunger. The respective strengths and weaknesses of these tools are weighed. A new measure, ?hunger vulnerability,? as gauged using Bassett and Winter-Nelson?s Hunger Vulnerability Index (HVI), is offered as a more comprehensive alternative to existing methods.

Part II examines hunger vulnerability as it relates to each factor in a conceptual framework that locates the sources of hunger. Broadly speaking, the authors examine how resources, technology and institutions of power affect the availability and distribution of goods and services at the national, household and individual levels.

The key concept, the HVI, is defined as ?the likelihood of current or future exposure of an

individual or group to hunger ... linked to socioeconomic, political and biophysical processes operating at local, national and international scales.? Hunger vulnerability as a model therefore provides a fuller and more detailed picture of poor people?s susceptibility to hunger, its interconnected underlying causes, and paths to possible solutions.

Bassett and Winter-Nelson present some rather surprising patterns in the data. It turns out that some of the most commonly held beliefs about the causes of hunger are not supported in the data when they identify weak correlations between HVI and population growth, health of the environment, changes in resource base, road density, and political freedoms. Conversely, they identify strong correlations between hunger variability and health care, literacy, technology and gender equality.

The recurring message of the atlas is that despite the popular belief that hunger results from overpopulation, natural and manmade disasters, and ignorance of good nutrition, in reality it is inextricably tied to poverty and social vulnerability. Suffering is greatest where governments are unaccountable and social safety nets are weak or nonexistent. Indeed it is governments that control policies that can exacerbate or alleviate poverty and hunger. And while some progress has been made, this is not a problem that is going away, for, as Bassett and Winter-Nelson point out, while the percentage of hungry people has gone down in recent years, the absolute number of hungry people has gone up as overall population growth outpaces that of the hungry population.

Bassett and Winter-Nelson?s accomplishment is twofold. They have produced the first global atlas of hunger while at the same time devising an innovative metric for world hunger that yields a surprising and thought-provoking new way to look at data on world hunger.

Whether hunger is silent and largely invisible as it was when I was in East Africa or thundering and crashing as it is now in the flooded areas of Pakistan, we must find new and effective solutions to combat this global menace.

[Julien Carriere is assistant professor of French and Italian at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Ky.]

For the statistically minded

The Hunger Vulnerability Index (HVI) combines distinct measures of hunger that include food availability (food imbalance), household access (poverty rate), and nutritional outcomes (growth failure).

Food availability is a measure of food supply as a percentage of daily need based on a 2,300 calorie diet. For example, if Tanzania does not possess the minimum number of calories to feed all of her people, we can divide the shortfall (340 calories in this case) by the minimum threshold of 2,300 to arrive at an availability score of 0.15 that converted to a percentage is 15. That number indicates to what extent there is a food shortage, thus the lower the number the better.

Brazil and India score a zero on food availability, which is a terrific score but we know that every year millions of their people go hungry. How can this be?

The simple truth is that while both countries export massive amounts of food annually, the poorest people lack the means to feed themselves. In these cases, hunger is detected by the HVI?s household access component, the percentage of people living below the international poverty line of $2 per day.

In the case of Tanzania, this amounts to 96 percent of the population and thus corresponds to a score of 96. Globally, more than 2.5 billion people survive on less than $2 a day.

That brings up an important concept when measuring poverty in monetary terms, purchasing power parity (PPP)

or ?international dollars,? which serve as a standard global currency. Simply put, $2 (2005 PPP) indicates how many calories of food one could purchase with $2 in the United States in 2005. (It is not how much food two U.S. dollars would buy in another country.) If $1 in the United States can buy food containing 2,100 calories, and Kenyans can buy 2,100 calories for 32 Kenya shillings (Ksh), then the PPP dollar exchange rate is Ksh 32 to the dollar. In fact, the official financial exchange rate currently is Ksh 75 to U.S. $1 -- more than double the value -- which serves to highlight how important it is to distinguish between U.S. and international PPP dollars.

The HVI?s nutritional outcomes component relies on the most relevant and widely available anthropometric data, the height-for-age measurements of children younger than 5. The percentage of clinical short-stature children is used for this component of the index.

The authors are careful to acknowledge the difficulties inherent in mapping hunger. There are the dual dangers of reducing the complex problems of poverty and hunger to a checklist, and proclaiming causal relationships when there are none. However, the Hunger Vulnerability Index reveals how countries with different conditions in each category may be equally vulnerable to hunger whereas a single indicator, such as food availability, might mask the problem.

-- *Julien Carriere*

Source URL (retrieved on *08/31/2014 - 03:31*): http://ncronline.org/books/2012/09/new-look-hunger