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## Why end world hunger by 2030? We have the moral obligation to end it now: Swami Agnivesh

The livestock and bio-fuels industry is snatching food from the plates of the hungry, the social activist told a UN World Food Programme meeting in Rome.



Image credit: Giulio d'Adamo/WFP

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[Swami Agnivesh](#)

I've never before returned from an international meet as greatly impressed as I did when I came back to India after attending a meeting of the United Nations' World Food Programme in Rome last month.

The meeting was addressed by Pope Francis, for whom I have great love and respect – he does not mince words when he speaks up for social justice.

There are [795 million](#) – or one in nine – undernourished people in the world today, and poor nutrition causes [45% of deaths](#) in children under five – 3.1 million children each year.

At the meeting, the 79-year-old leader of the Catholic Church, gave his [full support](#) to the World Food Programme's goal of achieving Zero Hunger by 2030.

At the meeting, everyone, including the pope, agreed that there was more than enough food for all humans in the world, and yet there was problem of global hunger.

The pope put the spotlight on the shameful wastage of food worldwide. "Food discarded is, in a certain sense, food that is stolen from the tables of the poor and the starving," he said.

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink," – these words embody one of the axioms of Christianity. But it may well serve as a golden rule for eradicating global hunger.

### **Act now**

In my address to the assembled delegates from over 150 countries, the majority of them from faith-based organisations, I questioned why the deadline for eradicating world hunger was fixed for 14 years later, and not now.

Quoting from the profound statement made by Pope Francis, I demanded that precious food grains that were meant for human consumption should "not be diverted for other purposes".

The global livestock industry has been guilty of feeding its cows and pigs on soya and corn to fatten them in order to get more profits from the sale of meat. Nearly 40% of foodgrains is thus diverted from the plates of hungry, dying children. Another 8%-10% is used to produce bio-fuels and alcohol. If this is stopped, not a single person will die of hunger in the world.

There was stunned silence in the great hall of the World Food Programme when I asked: "Has anyone ever seen a cow or a pig dying of hunger in any of the animal farm industries?"

Supporting the UN agency's action plan of advocacy by faith-based leaders I said that advocacy should mean:

“Speaking Truth to Power  
And making Powerful Truthful  
And thereby Truth Powerful”

I volunteered to work for the [Zero Hunger Challenge](#) for the rest of my life if we were ready to go to the root causes of hunger.

The global expenditure on the military in 2014 was an estimated [\\$1,776 billion](#). In order to meet the cost of food for hungry millions and other related problems, I suggested a 1% reduction in this annual expenditure.

I quoted [Helder Camara](#), an eminent archbishop of Latin America, who said:

“When I give bread to the poor, they call me a saint, but when I ask why the poor have no bread (because it is they who produce the bread) they call me a communist.”

I referred to a historic report released by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation 10 years ago called [Livestock’s Long Shadow Environmental Issues and Options](#) that reported that the livestock sector was a major source of greenhouse gas emissions as well as land and water degradation. The report – which recommended that the livestock industry’s environmental impact must be substantially reduced – was ignored.

However, besides pollution, the livestock industry is also responsible for taking food away from the hungry.

It was as far back as 1997 that American ecologist David Pimental [warned](#) that the US could feed 800 million people with the grain that was fed to livestock. That figure must have only increased now.

Pimental, professor of ecology in Cornell University’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences said: “More than half the US grain and nearly 40 percent of world grain is being fed to livestock rather than being consumed directly by humans.”

Pimental pointed out that animal protein production required more than eight times as much fossil-fuel energy than production of plant protein. He said cattle production was especially bad as it had an energy input to protein output ratio of 54:1 as compared to a ratio of 4:1 for broiler chicken. And while every kg of beef produced took 1 lakh liters of water to produce, one kg of wheat used 900 liters while potatoes consumed 500 litres for a kg of output.

Pimental said that the average American would still get more than the recommended daily allowance of meat and dairy protein with only grass fed livestock.

**Bio-fuels to blame too**

It's not just livestock. Bio-fuels are also guilty of stealing food from the plates of poor children.

In 2011, a report by a global thinktank warned that the US would have to stop supporting the production of bio-fuels if the world was to make any progress in [curbing](#) rising food prices, which was leading to hunger and starvation.

The [2011 Global Hunger Index report](#) said: "Price increases and volatility have arisen for three main reasons: increasing use of food crops for biofuels, extreme weather events and climate change, and increased volume of trading in commodity futures markets."

The report warned that 26 countries, mainly in sub Saharan Africa, were at extreme risk of hunger with bio-fuels playing a significant role in exacerbating the problem.

The report also said that India was one of three countries (the other two being Bangladesh and Timor-Leste) with the highest prevalence of underweight children younger than five - more than 40% in all three countries.

I hope and trust that the pope's clarion call to end global hunger will not go waste. If the world ignores his exhortations, the members states of the UN and world faith leaders will go down in history as responsible for perpetuating hunger and systemic terrorism while paying lip service to Zero Hunger.

*Swami Agnivesh is president emeritus, World Council of Arya Samaj, and board member of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Vienna.*

*We welcome your comments at [agnivesh70@gmail.com](mailto:agnivesh70@gmail.com)*