

To beat hunger, shift from food quantity to diet quality

November 25 2015, by Audrey E. Hoffer

The biggest food challenge today is not hunger but nutritional deficiency. That's the conclusion of Cornell food security experts who spoke at the National Press Club Nov. 23.

"We're near end of the period during which we should have achieved the U.N. Millennium Development Goals," said Per Pinstrup-Andersen, Cornell economist and policy analyst. They'll be replaced with Sustainable Development Goals by the end of December with the overriding goal to end poverty and malnutrition by 2030.

"Extreme poverty and hunger has been reduced even though more than 800 million worldwide still suffer from hunger and 40-50 million Americans are food insecure," he said.

More food is available but much is without the minerals and vitamins essential for optimal physical and mental growth. In developing countries the result is stunted growth and mental weakness.

Food scientists and economists know the problem isn't [food availability](#), but the public and press don't, said Chris Barrett, the David J. Nolan Director and Stephen B. & Janice G. Ashley Professor of Applied Economics and Management, and International Professor of Agriculture. "My concern is the media narrative hasn't changed in 40 years. The story needs to be there aren't enough minerals and vitamins in the diets poor people eat. A hidden hunger is the dominant form of food insecurity. We have to tell the press and people to shape a debate focusing on diet."

Some solutions the experts suggest:

- Develop business models that ensure micronutrient rich foods are available especially in remote geographic regions and for populations facing conflict where food shortages are intense, says Barrett. For example, an innovative nonprofit business in Rhode Island, Edesia, produces a micronutrient-rich food paste for emergency therapeutic feeding. When it's fed to children in refugee camps, health improvement is seen in 30 days.
- Increase the focus on diet quality, timeliness and delivery of food products, says Barrett. Transportation and power systems are basic needs especially in remote rural areas and need to be put in place simultaneously with advances in food productivity and quality.
- Put more money into research to increase productivity and reduce prices of food commodities like fruits and vegetables instead of into basic food staples, Pinstруп-Andersen suggests.
- Change the food value chain from an economics chain where profit is most important to a nutritional chain in which the goal is to improve nutritional value of food as it moves up the chain, Pinstруп-Andersen says.

"The Green Revolution was successful because it enabled more food to be available," said Pinstруп-Andersen. "It reduced caloric deficiencies but paid less attention to micronutrient deficiencies. Now we must shift the paradigm from [food](#) quantity to diet quality."

The event was part of "Inside Cornell," a series of media briefings that features Cornell faculty, staff and alumni talking on public policy issues in the nation's capital.

Provided by Cornell University

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