Feast or Famine: The Ecology and Politics of World Hunger

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This course was aimed at undergraduates with little to very good backgrounds on hunger issues. Readings presented frameworks for understanding different types of hunger that were fleshed out by case studies, debates, and media reports and opinion pieces. There were "hand-on" policy exercises as well as lectures followed or punctuated by questions and answers, and projects explored their own diet and the U.S. food system, in the context of hunger and food systems of the rest of the world.

The goal of the course was to have students understand the multiple and complex causes of hunger but also possible solutions. Another dimension was to set discussions firmly in the framework of human rights. Hunger is an abuse of human rights abuses. People have a right to adequate food not simply because they have basic needs or because they should not be victimized by exploitative political-economic systems, but because they are human beings, deserving of food.

Students in the class became knowledgeable about malnutrition. Through their research papers they also became "experts" on the food and hunger dimensions of another country, usually in the developing world. Most of these students go on to take advanced work in the social and natural sciences that will enable them to continue to address hunger issues. They also work in community contexts where they address hunger problems through public service.

Objectives: This course will analyze world hunger problems from ecological, political-economic, sociocultural, and nutritional perspectives. Drawing on archaeological, historical, and contemporary evidence, we will investigate the different types of hunger (food shortage, insufficient entitlement to food, food deprivation due to sociocultural or health factors); the contexts in which these types of hunger arise; and the efforts that have been made over the centuries to end hunger. Microbiologists will focus on the ecology and politics of seasonal hunger and famine; Part III on chronic hunger and food poverty; and Part IV on social groups especially vulnerable to food deprivation and various dimensions of malnutrition. All are interrelated. The course, while focusing on hunger in the Third World, will touch also on problems of hunger in industrialized nations and the prospects for improving the food-nutrition situations in both rich and poor nations.

Coordinating topics will include sustainable food systems; population, health, and nutrition policy; and global interdependence. To connect these global perspectives on hunger to particular peoples and places, each student will select one nation as a focus (case study) for more extensive research and for two written assignments. The first will deal with the ecology and politics of food availability in the nation selected. The second will explore a particular sociocultural, political-economic, or nutritional dimension of hunger interventions.

Required Readings:

1. Nutrient analysis exercises: Hunger in the U.S. (by Thursday, October 6th)
2. First short written assignment (by Thursday, October 27th)
3. Second short written assignment (by Tuesday, November 26th)
4. Essay Final Exam
Assignment 1 will be graded pass/fail. Assignments 2-4 will each count for 1/3 of the final grade.

Readings:

Each session will have required readings, which will complement lectures. There will also be recommended readings for many topics. These are a guide to further exploration of particular subject areas for your interests.

Texts: Six required texts have been ordered at the Brown University Bookstore. They should be read along with the appropriate readings, which will complement lectures.

INTRODUCTION

Biological and Socio-cultural Aspects of Human Beings, Human Food Systems, and Hunger (Sept 11th-15th)

Readings:


Recommended:


Nutritional Requirements and Hunger (Sept. 20th)

Readings:


What are recommended minimum intake of energy and essential nutrients?

How are dietary requirements and allowances set?

What are the intakes that affect adequacy of intakes?
Part I: The Ecology and Politics of Seasonal Hunger and Famine

Packaging of the Medford Declaration (handout for class discussion).

- Are the hunger standards the same in the U.S. as in the rest of the world?
- What opportunities are there for working against hunger in the greater Providence area?

Recommended:
- Heiser, (entire skim; then concentrate on crop plants that interest you).
- What is the complex relationship between the diffusion of agricultural resources and hunger?
- How do modern technologies in agriculture alleviate but also foster different types of hunger problems over the short and long term?

Oct. 11th-15th: Famines in Africa

Readings:
- Sukkary-Stolbo, S. "Indigenous Initiatives and Adaptation to Famine: The Case of the Western Sudan." pp.28-44.
- Dreze and Sen, pp.62-121.24-25, 257-59.

Recommended:
- How do national food and famine relief policies affect food supply and political stability?
- What lessons does the Asian experience hold for African famine prevention and relief efforts?
- What role does the press play in famine prevention and response?
- What are the ecological versus political factors that precipitate a food crisis?
- How abrupt is the transition from gardening to herding?
- How do people allot their time to food production and gathering?
- What are the social organization of food production and gathering?
- What are the hunger standards in the U.S. as in the rest of the world?
- What are the historical roots of famine in Africa?
- How might local, national, and international resources be combined productively to alleviate hunger problems?
- How do national food and famine relief policies affect food supply and political stability?