

"Awe-inspiring.... A well-told story of scarcity and hope." —Beliefnet

ROGER THUROW

**A YEAR IN AN AFRICAN
FARM COMMUNITY ON
THE BRINK OF CHANGE**



**THE LAST
HUNGER
SEASON**



**A READER'S GUIDE TO
THE LAST HUNGER SEASON**

We are providing the following supplementary materials—a Q & A with author Roger Thurow, questions for discussion, and a resource guide to learning more about, and getting involved in, the issues in this book—in the hope they will enhance your reading of The Last Hunger Season and provide a jumping-off point for reading group discussions. For more information about PublicAffairs books, visit us at publicaffairsbooks.com, at facebook.com/PublicAffairs, or follow @public_affairs on twitter.

**A CONVERSATION WITH AUTHOR
ROGER THUROW**

Q: This is your second book on global hunger and agricultural development, following *Enough: Why the World's Poorest Starve in an Age of Plenty*. As a journalist, how did you come to focus on these issues?

A: Covering the 2003 famine in Ethiopia for *The Wall Street Journal* was a personal and professional watershed for me. It was the first famine of the twenty-first century; 14 million people were on the doorstep of starvation, dependent on international food aid. On my first day in Addis Ababa, I received a briefing about the extent of the famine from the World Food Program (WFP). One of the WFP workers told me: “Looking into the eyes of someone dying of hunger becomes a disease of the soul. You see that nobody should have to die of hunger.”

A disease of the soul? I had received plenty of medical warnings during my years of reporting in Africa, but never one like this. The next day, I was down in the hunger zones, in an emergency feeding tent filled with dozens of severely malnourished children. There, for the first time, I truly looked into the eyes of the starving. What I saw did, indeed, become a disease of the soul; I saw that nobody should have to die of hunger, not now, not in the twenty-first century, when more food was being produced in the world than ever before. It was a turning point in my career as a journalist. I began asking questions I hadn't really pondered before. Other news stories began to seem less important, less compelling to me in comparison. I knew I needed to stop the usual routine of a foreign correspondent—moving from story to story, place to place—and focus on this one story: hunger in the new millennium. And as I drilled into that story, what I learned and the urgency I felt about it inspired me to write my first book, *Enough*, with fellow *WSJ* reporter Scott Kilman.

But for me, *Enough* wasn't enough. So I plunged deeper into the issue of hunger and agricultural development. To focus my writing, speaking, and thinking, I left *The Wall Street Journal* and joined the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, which was establishing itself as a leading voice of influence on this front. Africa continued to beckon: Ghana, Ethiopia, Rwanda. Eventually, my reporting led me to the smallholder farmers of Kenya and to *The Last Hunger Season*.

As I challenge others to get involved in the fight against hunger, I must also challenge myself: What more can I do as a journalist? I can't give farming advice or breed new seeds or design a crop insurance program or engineer a better grain-storage method. But I can take readers into the eyes of the hungry, spread the disease of the soul, raise the clamor. I can outrage and inspire.

Q: Why did you choose these four particular farmers as your main characters?

A: From my very first meetings with these farmers, I felt compelled to tell their stories. It's as if some force of divine guidance led me to each of them.

Francis *Wanjala* Mamati, with his very name, represented the essence of what I sought to portray—the hunger season. Leonida and her group, *Amua*—and her explanation of what they had *decided*, to move from the misery of hunger to the land of milk and honey—captured the journey I hoped to follow. Rasoa, with her bright smile and ambition, embodied the potential I wanted to chronicle. Zipporah, the poorest of all, displayed the emotions I desired to share.

From the outset, they understood and embraced our common vision: By telling their individual stories, they could help small-holder farmers around the world.

Q: Why write a non-fiction book in a novelistic style? Why aren't you present in the narrative?

A: I wanted readers to hear the farmers' own voices and to feel the farmers' fears, agonies, and joys through their own words and actions. The farmers needed to stand alone in the spotlight. These are their stories. I didn't want to interrupt their daily dramas with

my own observations. After a few clumsy attempts to write myself into the narrative—“Leonida told me,” “I wondered if Rasoa understood the consequence of her decision”—I discovered that I was only getting in the way of the farmers’ eloquence.

Q: What was your biggest a-ha! during the reporting?

A: The decisions the farmers made. How they weigh short-term needs against long-term goals; how they calculate further suffering into their decisions—such as deciding to extend the hunger season in order to keep their children in school. We in the rich world know so little about how the very poor make decisions. Academics have done their modeling, but there has been very little on-the-ground reporting. Along the way, I learned that having choice is liberating; choice is freedom. Providing choices should be the goal of international development, to free families from the imprisonment of “neither/nor” lives, to go beyond an “either/or” existence by introducing “and” into their lives: Feed my family *and* educate my children *and* afford health care *and* improve my house *and* enhance my livelihood.

Q: Are you optimistic that the last hunger season is in reach?

A: Yes, because I see a burgeoning movement committed to definitively ending hunger through agricultural development rather than temporarily alleviating it through food aid. I see renewed American leadership, more determined African government participation, and greater commitment by international institutions. I see this movement gathering momentum on university campuses, in corporate boardrooms, at faith-based gatherings, on the *shambas* of Africa, and elsewhere in the developing world. In May 2012, at The Chicago Council on Global Affairs’ symposium on food security and nutrition,

President Barack Obama summoned “all hands on deck” to end hunger in the twenty-first century. I see these many hands finally getting to work, and I pray that they keep reaching for the common goal.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

1. In the opening pages of the book, we see Leonida and Rasoia make decisions that will impact their families throughout the year. They decide to sell their maize harvests to provide for the education of their children. Can you understand their decisions? If you were given the choice between food or education—and could only choose one—which would you choose?

2. Could you identify with any of the farmers? Do you have to make decisions between immediate needs and long-term goals in your own life? How do you allocate your budget and set priorities for your family?

3. Before reading the book, what was your impression of life in rural Africa? Had you ever heard the phrase “hunger season”? What did you learn from this book about Africa, or about Kenya in particular, that surprised you the most?

4. After reading about the lives of Leonida, Rasoia, and Zipporah, how would you describe the role of women in African agricultural communities, families, and society, and the impact they can have on reducing poverty? Do you see women’s roles evolving as they become more successful as farmers and entrepreneurs?

5. Zipporah despairs about the health of her children. She embodies the double burden of women farmers: as they descend into the hunger season, they feel they are failures both as farmers (who produce meager harvests) and mothers (whose children are malnourished). Are there comparable double burdens in women’s lives in your own country or community?

6. Francis yearns for a kinship with farmers elsewhere in the world, wondering if even farmers in America suffer from drought. How do you see the role of Africa's smallholder farmers in the global food chain? Do you now feel any closer to them?

7. Do you agree with One Acre founder Andrew Youn that international development should focus on long-term solutions, like creating the conditions for farmers to feed themselves? What do you think of One Acre Fund's efforts to provide farmers access to the essential elements of farming? What else should they, and others, be doing?

8. Social entrepreneurs are known for their "disruptive" thinking. Do you have any disruptive ideas for ending hunger and extreme poverty?

9. How should food aid be used to help the hungry in Africa? What role should richer nations play more generally in assisting Africa? Should the private sector and the corporate world be at the vanguard of ending hunger and poverty?

10. As the *wanjala* began in western Kenya, the U.S. Congress was targeting foreign assistance in its zeal to cut the federal budget. Were you surprised to learn that U.S. foreign assistance accounts for less than 1 percent of the American budget? After reading the book, has your opinion of foreign aid changed? What do you think of the efforts to form a "circle of protection" around assistance aimed at reducing hunger and poverty?

11. In richer countries, discussions about food often revolve around food safety and quality issues: the use of fertilizers and pesticides and genetically-modified seeds; the frequency or morality of meat consumption; and whether food is locally or organically produced. But when Leonida wonders, "What's for dinner?," these issues are not of concern. She is worried if there is *anything* for dinner. How should the needs of people in the throes of a hunger season factor into rich-world foodie discussions?

12. Did it surprise you that farmers who suffer through a hunger season have cell phones? Do you think innovative technologies can help end hunger and extreme poverty, and, if so, which ones?

13. The central characters in the book have an abiding faith in God and many of the scenes in the book take place in churches. What role should faith-based organizations have in ending hunger?

14. What can you do to help end the hunger season and banish the oxymoron “hungry farmers” from our lexicon?

HOW YOU CAN HELP BRING ABOUT THE LAST HUNGER SEASON

Becoming informed, raising the clamor, and getting involved on the ground are three things you can do. Here are some organizations leading the way on these fronts, with smallholder farmers in the developing world at the center of their work:

Learn More

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, global agricultural development initiative, www.thechicagocouncil.org/globalagdevelopment.

One Acre Fund, www.oneacrefund.org.

Courter Films & Associates, www.thelasthungerseason.com. View scenes from the documentary of *The Last Hunger Season* and videos of the lives of smallholder farmers. See also www.courterfilms.com.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, www.gatesfoundation.org.

Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, www.agra-alliance.org.

Partnership to Cut Hunger and Poverty in Africa, www.partnership-africa.org.

The U.S. Agency for International Development’s Feed the Future program, www.feedthefuture.gov.

The United Nations' food organizations: The Food and Agriculture Organization, www.fao.org and www.endinghunger.org; the World Food Program, www.wfp.org and www.usa.wfp.org; and, the International Fund for Agriculture Development at www.ifad.org.

The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, www.cgiar.org.

Center for Strategic & International Studies, global food security project, www.csis.org.

Grow Africa, partnership including World Economic Forum and various multi-national corporations, growafrica.com.

Scaling Up Nutrition, scalingupnutrition.org and www.thousanddays.org

Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), www.gainhealth.org.

Raise Your Voice

ONE, advocating for the elimination of extreme poverty, www.one.org. Check out the Thrive campaign, which seeks to end hunger, improve nutrition, and raise incomes through agricultural development. Also here you will find a Faith section that includes a faith-based study guide and worship toolkit based on the book.

Oxfam and it's GROW campaign, www.oxfam.org.

Bread for the World, www.bread.org.

Alliance to End Hunger, alliancetoendhunger.org. Here you will find a list of Alliance members, including faith-based organizations from various religions and denominations that are striving to end hunger.

InterAction, www.interaction.org.

Results, www.results.org.

Get Involved on the Ground

Opportunity International, micro-finance for smallholder farmers, www.opportunity.org.

Concern Worldwide, www.concernworldwide.org and www.concern.net.

Action Against Hunger, www.actionagainsthunger.org.

Self Help Africa, www.selfhelpafrica.org.

Foods Resource Bank, www.foodsresourcebank.org.

HarvestPlus, www.harvestplus.org.

Trickle-Up, www.trickleup.org.

KickStart International, www.kickstart.org.

ActionAid, www.actionaidusa.org.

CARE, www.care.org.

Heifer International, www.heifer.org.

Women Thrive Worldwide, www.womenthrive.org.

The Hunger Project, www.thp.org.

Global FoodBanking Network, www.foodbanking.org.

To Follow My Work

Read my blogs at Global Food for Thought, www.thechicago council.org/globalagdevelopment, and at the ONE Campaign, www.one.org. And follow me on Twitter @rogerthurow.