Hunger has been present in most societies throughout history, to the point where one might think it’s a natural, albeit unwanted, part of human society. At the same time, eradicating hunger has been at the top of national and international agendas for decades, featuring as a main goal in both the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As attention to the prevalence of hunger has increased so has our common understanding of it evolved. Nowadays concepts like chronic and acute malnutrition, micronutrient deficiencies (also known as “hidden hunger”) and food insecurity are all linked to hunger. And as our understanding has evolved a myriad of interventions to try and eradicate hunger have been put in place. Still millions of people around the world go hungry every day. Indeed, one might start to think eradicating hunger is an impossible task.

It is within this setting that M. Jahi Chappell’s book *Beginning to End Hunger* sits. It’s an eye-opening book both for those working on matters of hunger and for those who don’t. We all have a relationship with food and preconceived notions about how food and food shortages function in the world. From the first page Chappell questions the knowledge and our main taken-for-granted truths about hunger. Drawing from a broad range of literature he lays out the main views and ideologies around hunger and food shortage throughout time and picks apart common misconceptions about the causes and prevalence of hunger and food insecurity. In true critical geography spirit he further delves into why these misconceptions have held up for so long, particularly by asking the question of who benefits from the status quo. Even more importantly he does not stop at critique, but offers a real-life example where drastic reductions of hunger have been achieved and lays out the conditions through which this was made possible.

In Chapter 1, “Food and Famine Futures, Past and Present”, Chappell explores the place of hunger in our global food system, and we are introduced to two key concepts that follow us throughout the book: [i] “active optimism” – the idea that hunger can be ended; and [i] “Cui bono?”, i.e. who is benefiting from the status quo? Chapter 2 goes through the evolution of frameworks for analysing hunger, and serves as a useful background to Chapter 3 where we are introduced to the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte, the birthplace of a range of
food security policies considered as highly successful both nationally and world-wide. To me Chapter 4 stands out as particularly informative in that it attempts to explain how these ambitious policies were born and established in Belo Horizonte in the 1990s. It moves beyond a description of the nuts and bolts of these programmes, shedding light on the importance of timing, institutions and political will for the birth and success of policies. In Chapter 5, “Farm, Farmer, and Forest”, the focus is moved to the rural setting, and to food security programmes aimed at small-scale farmers with the aim of improving food security for themselves and a growing urban population. In a particularly refreshing move the chapter examines whether in addition to food security and farmer livelihood benefits the programmes may also have a positive effect on the environment. Chapter 6 summarizes with main findings from the book and lifts its gaze outwards to how the experience in Belo Horizonte and Brazil can be informative elsewhere.

A main strength of Chappell’s book is that it effectively engages the reader and challenges basic taken-for-granted notions about the cause and perpetuation of hunger. Many of us will have heard the response when asked to achieve a seemingly impossible task – “…and next we’ll solve world hunger” (p. 4) – or been guilty of having held the fatalistic belief that because our societies still suffer from starvation and hunger it must be an inevitable part of them. He delves into perhaps the largest misconception around food insecurity which in certain fields still dominates discussions, i.e. that all we need to do is produce more food. For instance, when placed under scrutiny by Chappell the perceived scientific “fact” that we need 70-100% increases in food production to feed future populations may be closer to a mere 6% increase needed, and, in fact, when looking at previous improvements the largest drops in malnutrition have actually been achieved by improvements in water and sanitation systems, and not from increasing food supply.

Critically scrutinizing information taken as “fact” is none the less important when assessing the evidence bases we use to determine the success and effectiveness of a programme or policy. It’s a major task to prove cause or effect of an intervention in the real world, inherently difficult given that we can never truly know what the world would have looked like without it, and given the difficulty in isolating its impact from the range of alternative explanations present in the environment (see Guo and Fraser [2015] on the idea of “counterfactuals”). In that sense there is an important distinction to be made between monitoring progress of an outcome after an intervention was put in place (and uncritically
assigning a causal link between the two) and thoroughly engaging with and unpicking impacts of the specific intervention from alternative explanations. Likewise, questions like who is benefiting and who is not, and what the possible unintended consequences or trade-offs of the intervention are, are vital to consider.

When examining the food security secretary in Belo Horizonte and the series of food programmes which evolved under its supervision Chappell does not shy away from exploring the nuances of the food policy. He shows areas where the multiple interventions clearly have generated positive change in people’s access to food, and highlights especially how creating agency for people (a main pillar in the 5 A’s food security framework developed by Cecilia Rocha) have made a positive impact on people’s food security. At the same time he also explores who hasn’t been able to benefit from the programmes, and in some cases questions whether those who have participated were those most in need of assistance. He also reminds us of the importance of including the factor of time into the equation, highlighting that the institutions so vital for the success of an intervention evolve and change over time, for good and for bad, and achieving food security is really a continuous process. In his own words, “...there always remains more to be done in an area such as food security,...[it] is a marathon project” (p. 92), or as stated by staff of the food secretariat, “‘success’...would imply that the secretariat had completed its job and that food insecurity was no longer a problem” (ibid.). This leads me to think the whole idea of referring to an intervention as a success may in itself be problematic.

Lastly, because of the unpredictability of the world and the numerous interactions that go on within it, when assessing an intervention it is also important to consider both intended and unintended impacts. Chappells’ ant study in Chapter 5 is therefore particularly interesting. Rather than the more commonly explored link on how biodiversity can influence food security the study considers the other direction, i.e. how a food security programme may positively impact biodiversity. I In doing so he challenges another commonly held view: that human development has to come at the expense of the environment. As Chappell points out: “what we believe...has profound effects on notions of reality and the interventions we subsequently propose” (p.12), and therefore challenging such common beliefs and making sure they hold up to scrutiny is vital in our quest to achieve universal food security. And it is because of Chappell’s contribution in doing just that, that I believe this book is indeed a step towards *Beginning to End Hunger*. 

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Reference


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