

VIEWPOINT

Let All Children Eat

THOMAS POGGE

The billionaires fight a two-front war. Within the United States, they fight to convert the country into an enduring plutocracy in which their wealth will enable them to dominate the three branches of government forever. Internationally, they utilize the vast military, economic, and diplomatic power of the US government to expand their dominion: to structure the global trade and financial systems to their extractive advantage and to modify or disable any states and other organizations that resist their agenda.

This war has entered a new phase with President Trump's second term: his administration is openly disregarding constitutional constraints on presidential power; and the United States is openly flouting fundamental rules of the rules-based international order by threatening to annex foreign territories (with ethnic cleansing, in the case of Gaza), for example, and by imposing sanctions on supranational officials for doing their jobs.¹

The US elites who opposed Trump are now either scrambling to share in the spoils of his victory, or else denouncing him as a threat to justice and human rights. The denunciations are insincere, as the leaders of the Democratic Party were equally willing to sell their services when they had the chance, though they did so with tedious lip service to morality. Thus, it was Bill Clinton who—on behalf of intellectual property-heavy US corporations—imposed the TRIPS Agreement on the developing world, ensuring that its peoples would have to pay heavy road tolls to patent holders in the Global North for the privileges of partaking in advanced agriculture, globalized business communications, and the manufacture and use of new pharmaceuticals.² Millions have died because they could not afford life-saving medicines that generics firms would manufacture and sell very cheaply if patent enforcement didn't prevent them from doing so. The Clinton administration also slashed development assistance by 20% in real terms between 1991 and 2001, reducing it from 0.20% of US gross national income to 0.11%—even while the US enjoyed a rich peace dividend from the fall of the Soviet Union, and even though the rich countries had promised 0.7%.³ It refused to pay US dues to the United Nations (UN), causing CNN founder Ted Turner to step in with a US\$1 billion donation in 1998. It pushed the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to impose struc-

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tural adjustment programs on indebted developing countries. And it promoted bilateral treaties that allow US multinationals to sue foreign states for compensation when their profit expectations are disappointed on account of improving protections for workers, the environment, or the country's natural wealth.

Faced with the billionaires' broad onslaught and rapid advance, the instinctive reaction is to protect one's family and local community and to save with rearguard actions what can be saved of the rest of the world. Perhaps philanthropists and foundations can replace some of the domestic funding felled by the Department of Government Efficiency's ax, thereby preserving important medical research, legal aid, scholarships, national park services, etc. Perhaps private or public funds can be found to fill gaps left by sudden withdrawals of US funding for health, nutrition, and education abroad.

Create a clear countermodel: School meals

Such efforts are important. But they will not stop the plutocrat-driven pandemic of national selfishness. To do so, we must—alternative both to Trump's discarding of morality and to his predecessors' instrumentalizing it to accumulate soft power—create a clear countermodel that anticipates a world governed by rules and procedures grounded in a shared recognition of basic human needs and rights.

A globally universal school meals program is a realistic, unambiguous, highly visible first step that can unite a broad range of morally motivated actors. Wherever healthy food is lacking, each child should have a full, healthy meal, locally sourced, on every school day. Strongly backed by human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) maxim "leave no one behind," this is a widely recognized imperative, given humanity's enormously enhanced technological, economic, and administrative capacities.

The proposed program would serve many SDGs: by eradicating poverty (goal 1) and hunger (goal 2), and by promoting health (goal 3), educa-

tion (goal 4), and access to decent work (goal 8), it reduces social and economic inequalities (goal 10), promotes responsible consumption and production (goal 12), and creates fairer, more inclusive societies (goal 16) through an international partnership (goal 17) in which experiences are shared and reliable needs-based support is available to all lower-income countries to enable and incentivize their participation.

States adopted the SDGs at the UN in 2015 without any understandings on responsibilities—on who was supposed to do what to achieve the goals. Relishing immediate praise for setting lofty goals, adopting officials were content to risk future disappointments as problems for their successors. Many may have thought that the SDGs would largely realize themselves through ordinary economic growth and naturally rising technological and administrative capacities. But mounting inequality and violence around the world, and COVID-19, have dashed this hope. We are behind schedule on 83% of the SDG targets, and on 35% we have made no progress at all, even retrogressing in half of the latter.⁴

The fight to end undernourishment is emblematic. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization reports that the number of food-insecure people is up nearly 50% since 2015.⁵ The agency also estimates for each country the bare minimum cost of a healthy diet—US\$2.63 per person per day in the United States in 2022—and finds that nearly three billion human beings still cannot afford such a diet.⁶ This while the purchasing-power-adjusted per capita gross world product has reached US\$63 per person per day.⁷ Children are especially affected. Malnutrition impairs their development and thus their future health and performance. Add to this that 250 million children are out of school as many impoverished and often highly indebted families put their children to work.⁸ Some 160 million children are engaged in wage work, many others help their families with household chores or farm labor, and others live in war zones or, as girls, are not allowed to go to school.⁹

This colossal waste of human potential is a crime against humanity when we could so easily

reduce it. School meals promote children's mental and physical development and thereby their future opportunities and performance. They motivate parents to send their kids to school. They raise the family's nutritional status and inculcate healthy eating habits. Locally sourced, they create jobs and build agricultural and administrative capacity. They also enable states, using the power of procurement, to move producers toward more sustainable agricultural practices. All this is supported by ample evidence drawn from the 418 million children who are already getting them.¹⁰

The chief obstacle is the financial condition of the often heavily indebted low- and lower-middle-income countries, in the former of which, thus far, only 18% of primary school children receive meals.¹¹ As an opportunity and incentive, the proposed program should guarantee that each country willing to initiate, enhance, or expand a domestic school meals scheme will receive the needed support for doing so.

The proposed program would advance a central ambition of the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty, which the G20 launched in 2024 on the initiative of Brazil's President Lula da Silva. School meals are one of its six "2030 Sprint" priorities.¹² Linked to this Global Alliance and in collaboration with the World Food Programme, a broad-based School Meals Coalition has already been formed and could be upgraded to take on crucial clearinghouse functions: calculating the need-based financial support due various lower-income countries and the capacity-based contributions from participating higher-income countries, while also setting standards of adequacy for national school lunch schemes, monitoring and auditing them, and maintaining a repository of data and best practices from such schemes around the world.¹³

At an estimated average cost of US\$64 per child per year, the annual cost of the proposed program might in time reach as high as US\$40 billion.¹⁴ If subsidies averaged 50%, the high-income countries would have to contribute US\$20 billion per year—or less, if China also agreed to contribute. Their average burden would then be around 0.025% of gross national income, or US\$12 per person per

year on average, with variations reflecting differences in national per capita incomes. Who could possibly resent such a small contribution when it achieves so much for so many children around the world?

Some high-income governments would refuse, at least initially, their international human rights obligations notwithstanding.¹⁵ This gap might be filled privately via the Ted Turner model: through donations by firms, foundations, and philanthropists, as well as through bequests. Over time, the program might build an endowment that would help cover its expenses and help smooth out fluctuations in receipts and disbursements.

A small step for the affluent, the proposed global school meals program would be a very big step forward for the world's children—and a significant milestone on the path to a world order whose rules are grounded in shared moral commitments. It would moreover be a magnificent capstone to four consecutive years of Southern leadership of the G20, which have also seen the admission of the African Union as the 21st—and first-ever added—member. Despite all the distractions, let us get this program started in 2025! To achieve this, we must mobilize a broad range of citizens to demand that their governments advance and support this significant and symbolic initiative without delay.

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