Forty years of food technology brought famine-riddled countries back from brink

In the mid-1970s, the outlook for food supplies around the world was grim. There were talks of "food triage" — food-rich countries would decide which food-poor countries should get food, thereby dooming the rest to death. At that point, famines in Bangladesh and Ethiopia had killed hundreds of thousands of people, and countries such as India and Pakistan were teetering on the brink.

Fast forward to today: Hunger and malnutrition still exist, but not nearly on the same scale. Bangladesh and Ethiopia have halved the prevalence of hunger in their countries in the past 15 years. Indeed, the drastic progress humanity has made in ensuring food security and nutrition makes the thought of a food triage something out of a dystopian movie. How did this happen?

There are many actors who've played significant parts, including Norman Borlaug, father of the Green Revolution and Amartya Sen, who helped understand the structural and political drivers of famines. One of the key roles behind the scenes was that of evidence-based food policy research, which helped guide decision making in a way that changed the food security and nutrition landscape for many countries.

Food policy research generates the evidence behind decisions to help ensure that all people have access to safe, sufficient, nutritious, and sustainably grown food. It also provides policy options to distribute scarce resources, such as food, land, and water. Food policy research also looks at sectors beyond agriculture to better pursue the goal of a hunger- and malnutrition-free world.

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