

Case 2: Soylent Hunger

Half of the world's population (approximately 3 billion) is poor, while a third is so impoverished that it lives on the brink of starvation – i.e., unable to meet its most basic survival needs.⁶ The projected increase in world population over the next few decades (2 billion) suggests that famine will become ever more pervasive.⁷ A proposed solution to this problem is to mass-manufacture and distribute a drink called “Soylent.”

Developed by a software engineer as a substitute for more costly whole-foods meals, Soylent is a thick, beige liquid designed to provide the body with all the necessary nutrients, and “[a]t around \$3 per meal, the product could be a real money saver for some people.”⁸ Because Soylent does not spoil, it could be transported to underdeveloped countries with greater ease than fruits and vegetables.⁹ Citing a lack of phytonutrients, some experts remain skeptical about the ability of a drink comprised of 30 ingredients to satisfy the body's daily nutritional needs. As Walter Willett, chair of the nutrition department at the Harvard School of Public Health, acknowledges, people could survive on Soylent, but they may not have optimal function.¹⁰ Still, Soylent's creator claims that his product could help ameliorate “many issues around food aid and security.”

Quite apart from the lack of a comprehensive study confirming Soylent's supposed ability to nourish the body¹¹, the cultural consequences of replacing a whole foods diet with a shake produced in the industrial West may be problematic. An anthropological perspective on food reveals that food is not just another commodity: it is “life giving,”¹² it involves farming, which in turn “means rural livelihoods, traditions and cultures...[and] agrarian histories.”¹³ Moreover, not all famine is created equal: the anatomy of hunger and food insecurity in Southern Mexico will not be identical to Zimbabwe's. For this reason, food security activists and researchers have favored local (not imported) solutions to endemic famine.¹⁴

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⁶ Pogge, Thomas. 2005. World Poverty and Human Rights. *Ethics & International Affairs* 19(1):1-7.

⁷ Timmer, Peter. 2008. Staving Off the Global Food Crisis. *Nature* 453(7196):722-723.

⁸ Lauren Russell, "Could Soylent solve world hunger?," CNN, December 13, 2013,

<http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/13/health/soylent-hunger/>

⁹ Caleb Melby, "Soylent Founder: My Product Can Solve Global Hunger," *Forbes*, June 17, 2013,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=saGpYXiVDOY>

¹⁰ Lizzie Widdicombe, "The End of Food," *The New Yorker*, May 12, 2014,

http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2014/05/12/140512fa_fact_widdicombe?currentPage=all

¹¹ Farhad Manjoo, "The Soylent Revolution Will Not Be Pleasurable," *New York Times*, May 28, 2014,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/29/technology/personaltech/the-soylent-revolution-will-not-be-pleasurable.html>

¹² Marchione, Tom. 2008. A Time to Rethink the Global Food Regime. *Anthropology News in Focus* 49(7):5-6.

¹³ Mallick, Sambit. 2008. Peter M. Rosset, *Food is Different: Why We Must Get the WTO Out of*

Agriculture. *Agriculture and Human Values* 25:463-464.

¹⁴ Masood, Ehsan. 2003. A Continent Divided. *Nature* 426(6964):224-226.