

INTRODUCTION TO HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

FIELD NOTE

Awakening to World Hunger

Dragging myself out of bed for a 9:00 A.M. lecture, I decide I need to make a stop at Starbucks. “Grande coffee of the day, please, and leave room for cream.” I rub my eyes and look at the sign to see where my coffee was grown. Kenya. Ironically, I am about to lecture on Kenya’s coffee plantations. Just the wake-up call I need.

When I visited Kenya in eastern Africa, I drove from Masai Mara to Kericho and I noticed that nearly all of the agricultural fields I could see were planted with coffee or tea (Fig. 1.1). I also saw the poor of Kenya, clearly hungry, living in substandard housing. I questioned, “Why do farmers in Kenya grow coffee and tea when they could grow food to feed the hungry?” Trying to answer such a question sheds light on the complexities of globalization. In a globalized world, connections are many and simple answers are few.

On its face, such a huge problem might seem easy to solve. Take the total annual food production in the world, divide it by the world’s population, and we have plenty of food for everyone. Yet one-seventh of the world’s population is seriously malnourished. The vast majority of the 1 billion malnourished people on Earth are women and children, who have little money and even less power.

Figure 1.2 shows how food consumption is currently distributed—unevenly. Comparing Figure 1.2 with Figure 1.3 shows that the wealthier countries also are the best fed and that Sub-Saharan Africa (the part of Africa south of the Sahara Desert) is currently in the worst position, with numerous countries in the highest categories of hunger and malnourishment.

The major causes of malnourishment are poverty (inability to pay for food), the failure of food distribution systems, and cultural and political practices that favor some groups over others. Where food does reach the needy, its price may be unaffordable. Two billion people subsist



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Figure 1.1

Kericho, Kenya. Tea plantations established by British colonists in western Kenya. The impact of colonialism was pervasive—not just on the political institutions and social relations, but on the landscape as well.



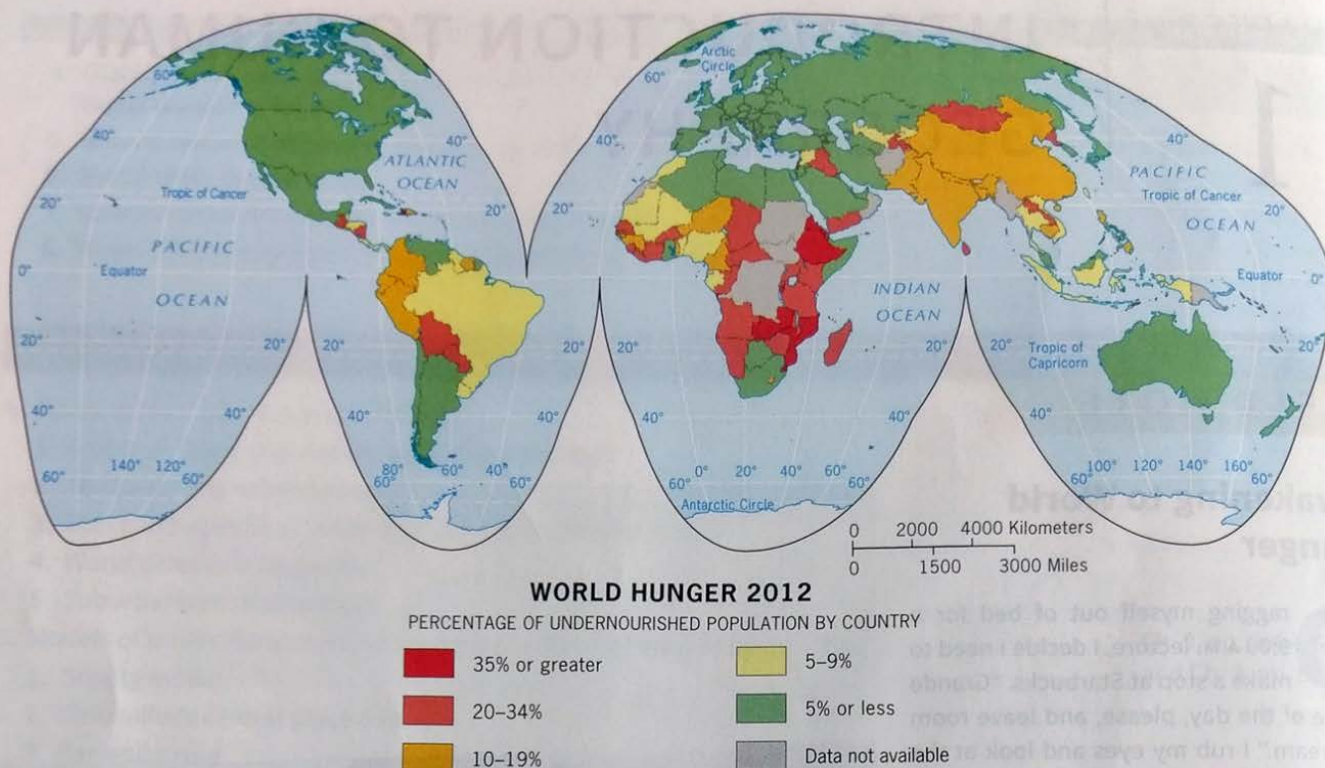


Figure 1.2

World Food Program Hunger Map, 2012. Classifications designate the proportion of the population malnourished. The World Food Program estimates that just under one billion people worldwide are malnourished. *Data from: United Nations World Food Program 2012.*

on the equivalent of two dollars a day, and many in the vast shantytowns encircling some of the world's largest cities must pay rent to landlords who own the plots on which their shacks are built. Too little is left for food, and it is the children who suffer most.

Is solving hunger as simple as each country growing enough food to feed its people? Do the best-fed countries have the most arable (farmable) land? Only 4 percent of Norway is arable land, and more than 70 percent of Bangladesh is arable land (Fig. 1.4). Despite this disparity, Norway is wealthy and well fed, whereas Bangladesh is poor and malnourished. Norway overcomes its inadequate food production by importing food. Bangladesh depends on rice as its staple crop, and the monsoon rains that flood two-thirds of the country each year during monsoon season are good for rice production, but they make survival a daily challenge for some.

If a poor country has a small proportion of arable land, does that destine its population to a lifetime of malnourishment? It depends on the place. Of all the land classified as arable, some is much more productive than others. For example, only 8 percent of Kenya's land is arable, but areas in the western highlands are some of the most productive agricultural land in the world. Do the Kenyans simply not produce enough food on their lands? Is that what accounts for their malnutrition rate of over 30 percent? No, hunger in Kenya depends much more on what it produces, who owns the land, and how Kenya is tied into the global economy.

Kenya's most productive lands, those in the western highlands, are owned by foreign coffee and tea corporations. Driving through the open, luxury-crop-covered slopes, I saw mostly Kenyan women working the plantations. The lowland plains are dotted by small farms, many of which have been subdivided to the point of making the land unviable. Here, an even higher proportion of the people working the lands are women, but the lands are registered to their husbands or sons because, by law, they cannot own them.

As I drove through the contrasting landscapes, I continued to question whether it would be better for the fertile highlands to carry food crops that could be consumed by the people in

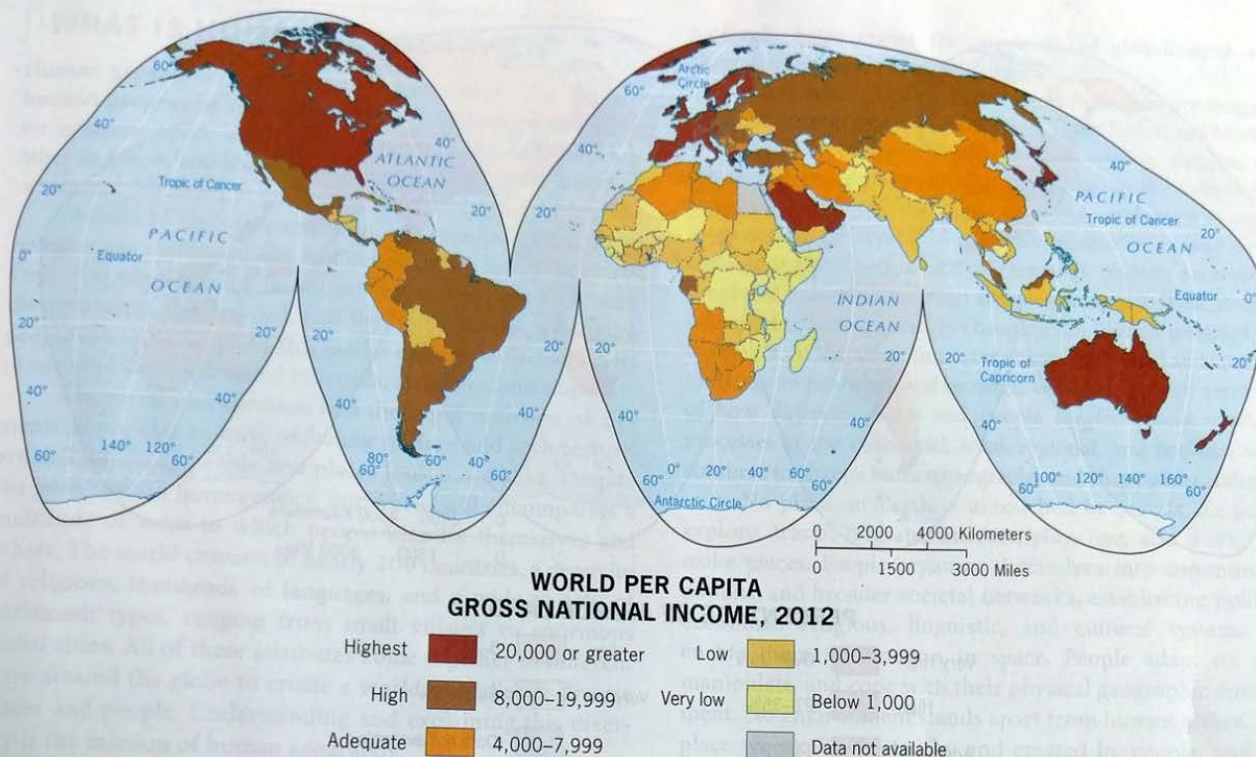


Figure 1.3

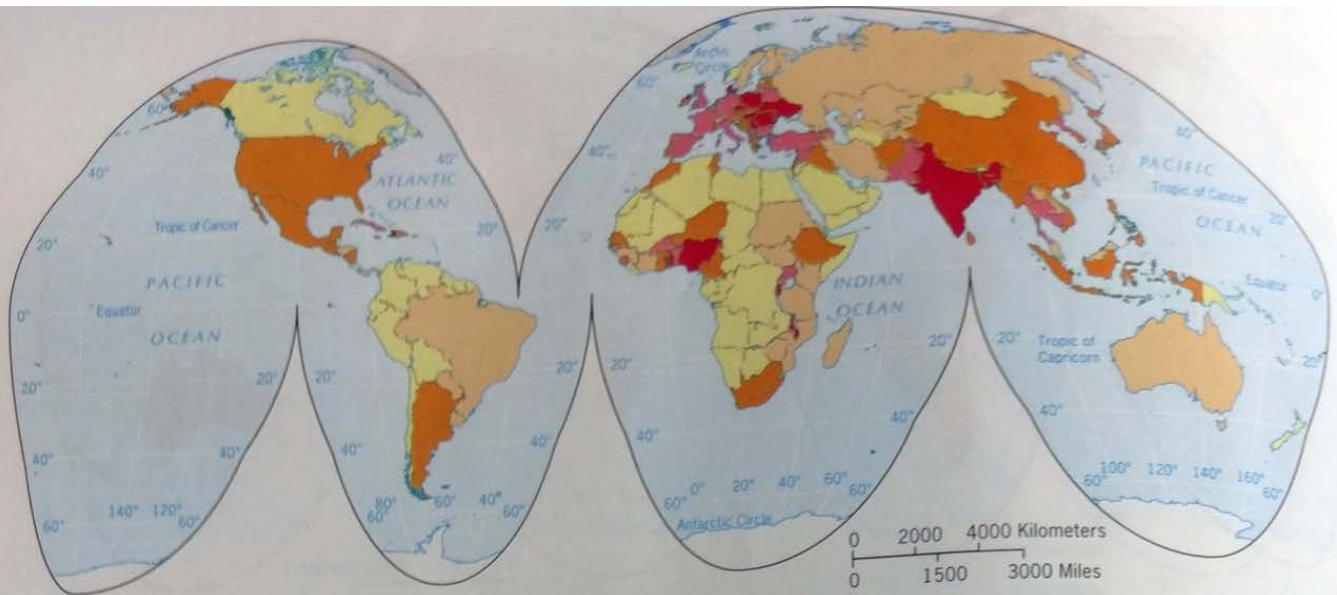
Per Capita Gross National Income (in U.S. Dollars) (GNI), 2012. From a socioeconomic standpoint, we live in an unequal world, but this map only shows the formal economy because the GNI per capita does not estimate the informal economy. Maps, like this, that shade each country a different color report data by country and tell us nothing about the variation within countries. Data from: World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2012.

Kenya. I drove to the tea processing center and talked to the manager, a member of the Kikuyu ethnic group, and asked him my question. He said that his country needed foreign income and that apart from tourism, exporting coffee and tea was the main opportunity for foreign income.

As part of an increasingly globalized economy, Kenya suffers from the complexities of globalization. With foreign corporations owning Kenya's best lands, a globalized economy that thrives on foreign income, tiny farms that are unproductive, and a gendered legal system that disenfranchises the agricultural labor force and disempowers the caregivers of the country's children, Kenya has multiple factors contributing to poverty and malnutrition in the country. In addition to these structural concerns, Kenyan agro-pastoralists, especially in the northeast, have suffered higher rates of famine since a drought began in the region in 2006. Agro-pastoralists raise crops and have livestock; therefore, they struggle against drought as well as livestock diseases and political conflict.

To solve one of the structural problems in Kenya raises another. If Kenyans converted the richest lands to cash crop production, how would the poor people be able to afford the crops? What would happen to the rest of Kenya's economy and the government itself if it lost the export revenue from tea and coffee? If Kenya lost its export revenue, how could the country pay loans it owes to global financial and development institutions?

Answering each of these questions requires geographic inquiry because the answers are rooted in the characteristics of places and the connections those places have to other places. Moreover, geographic **fieldwork** can provide tremendous insights into such questions. Geographers have a long tradition of fieldwork. They go out in the field and see what people are doing, they observe how people's actions and reactions vary across space, and they develop maps and other visualizations that help them situate and analyze what they see. We, the authors,



PERCENTAGE OF ARABLE LAND

Very High	Over 35%	Low	5–10%
High	21–35%	Very low	Below 5%
Adequate	11–20%		Data not available

Figure 1.4

Percent of Land that is Arable (Farmable), 2008. Arable land is an important resource for countries, but in our globalized world, many countries with limited land suitable for agriculture are able to import the food they need to feed their population. Data from: United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, 2011.

have countless field experiences, and we share many with you to help you understand the diversity of Earth's surface and show how global processes have unique outcomes in different places.

Solving major global problems such as hunger or HIV-AIDS is complicated in our interconnected world. Each solution has its own ramifications not only in one place, but also across regions, nations, and the world. Our goals in this book are to help you see the multitude of interconnections in our world, enable you to recognize the patterns of human geographic phenomena that shape the world, give you an appreciation for the uniqueness of place, and teach you to ask and answer your own geographic questions about this world we call home.

Key Questions **FOR CHAPTER 1**

1. What is human geography?
2. What are geographic questions?
3. Why do geographers use maps, and what do maps tell us?
4. Why are geographers concerned with scale and connectedness?
5. What are geographic concepts, and how are they used in answering geographic questions?