

## PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

### Individual and public necessities

On a recent overseas flight home, Harwood's seatmate was a physician from Florida who asked what he was doing in Senegal. Harwood explained the community-led development process he was conducting in Moundouwaye and the two projects the community had identified.

From there the discussion turned to a more general discussion of agricultural policy. As Harwood explained the low price-elasticity of demand for agricultural products, his seatmate said the same thing was true of his field, medicine.

His seatmate then went on to say that he believed food, medical care, and education were all public goods. While they do not meet the definition of public goods as postulated by Paul Samuelson (for a general discussion see: <http://tinyurl.com/za6wft>), they do have a number of similarities and might be called social goods because they all contribute to the welfare of society as a whole.

Everyone in society should have access to food (along with water), medical care, and education. And, there are consequences that are borne by both the individual and society when some are partially or fully excluded. Likewise, there are benefits to society when all people are given access to a basic level of each of these. In one way or another, all three are what Adam Smith called necessities.

In a recent column (<http://www.agpolicy.org/weekcol/812.html>) we made the case that food as a whole is a coercive good because people cannot drop out of the food market when prices are more than they can afford. They cannot wait for prices to come down like they can with flat screen televisions.

In 1948, the right to food was recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which the US is a signatory. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food described it as "the right to have regular, permanent and free access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensures a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear."

While the right to food does not guarantee everyone access to caviar and wine, it does set forth a basic standard below which there are mental and physical consequences for the individual as well as society as a whole. Inadequate nutrition can result in increased mortality rates, higher health care costs, reduced economic output for the economy as a whole, and social and political instability. Today, nearly 70 years after the right to food was recognized, over 800 million people still fall below that standard with many becoming refugees attempting to cross international borders,

triggering social instability.

With medical care, the time constraints are generally not as tight as with food, but at times there is not a moment to spare. Some people have a predisposition to certain illnesses and or live in an environment that exposes them to higher health risks resulting in increased health care needs. Others are more fortunate. But, at any given moment it may be difficult to determine who is going to need the greatest access to health care in the next six months.

Like with food, everyone deserves access to a basic level of health care that "ensures a physical and mental, individual and collective fulfilling and dignified life" within the constraints of any illness they may have. At the same time it does not mean that everyone has access to Botox injections or a nose job. When people lack access to health care, economic productivity may fall and social costs may increase.

Access to a quality education should not be dependent upon the income of a child's parents. In the US, a free public education was a characteristic of the New England colonies before 1776. With the formation of a new nation, the Continental Congress adopted the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

Together they established a one-square-mile-grid system with townships being comprised of 36 sections or square miles—a 6 mile by 6 mile block of land. In each township the sections were numbered from 1 to 36 with section 16 being set aside to finance a public education system for all township residents.

In the beginning, the township schools provided a basic education. Over time, townships were expected to provide all children with an eighth grade education. Before long, high schools were becoming the norm.

In the midst of the American Civil War, Congress passed the Morrill Act of 1862 which set aside federal land to be used by each state for the establishment and funding of a college that was, "without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactic, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life."

In three quarters of a century, the public support of education went from providing a basic elementary education to the establishment of a system of Land-Grant Colleges. A public education system was established and improved on the belief that the nation as a whole benefitted from an educated citizenry. And that certainly has been true, with no better proof than the economic boom the US experienced following the provision of access to educational benefits for return-

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ing GIs as a part of the GI Bill.

Together, public policies that provide support for agricultural and food programs, access to quality health care, and the operation of a system of public education have produced benefits not only for the affected individuals but for society as a whole.

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