

A woman in a yellow top and colorful headscarf carries a large bunch of green bananas on her head. A baby is strapped to her back. She is holding a knife in her hands. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

By Dean Houghton

FEEDING A FRAGILE WORLD

*Farmer, photographer,
and philanthropist
Howard Buffett focuses
on a growing
global food gap*

When Howard Buffett plants corn and soybeans each spring on his central Illinois farm, he is surrounded by technology. He sails through fields planting with precisely GPS-guided no-till row units. When fall comes, his harvest feeds not only his family, but 144 other people.

When the farm work is caught up, however, Buffett is likely to be found in parts of the world where farming and food are anything but bountiful. "I have met young mothers who tell me they have to make choices when times get tough," Buffett says. "They have to decide which child gets to eat, and which one goes without food."

First-hand look. Buffett travels the world as a United Nations Ambassador Against Hunger on behalf of the World Food Programme, as well as checking in on projects funded by his Howard G. Buffett foundation. (He's the eldest son of legendary Omaha businessman Warren Buffett.) But he does a lot more than simply travel and donate money to various causes.

►**Left:** Both a cash crop and food for the family, this banana harvest serves a dual purpose for a family in Mozambique. ►**Below:** The World Food Programme of the United Nations feeds 90 million people in 20 countries, helping not only the poor but refugees from countries in conflict.



He brings a farmer's "get-er-done" attitude, pushing for practical steps to help people today. "You can't meet these people and have these experiences and then just leave it all behind," he says. "I have to do something."

Food gap. One of the things Buffett has done is to share his experiences in a book called *Fragile: The Human Condition*. National Geographic Missions partnered with his foundation on the book project (visit the Web site fragilethehumancondition.com to order the book, with proceeds going to food assistance programs).

It's a massive 320-page hardcover book that contains 440 of Buffett's photographs—not always pretty pictures, but honest images that provide a straightforward look at the growing food gap around the globe.

"I've always carried a camera," he says. "As I'm out doing foundation work, I do interviews with the people we meet, and make photographs. I thought I should share their stories. I'm not sure how much this book can do to help solve hunger, but keeping that information in a pile on my desk wasn't going to do much good."

Describing the world's food problems primarily through the stories of individuals from 64 countries that he has visited, Buffett lays out some sobering facts. He points out, for ex-



ample, that hunger and malnutrition are a way of life for 1 billion people around the world—a billion people who go to bed hungry each night—and that number is growing. He also points out that, even though American farmers can take pride in helping to feed the world, the solution to hunger is not simply fencerow-to-fencerow farming in the developed world.

"The poor in Africa, for example, can't afford to buy enough food," Buffett says. "Transportation costs often are not affordable. And many times conflict is a factor preventing food shipments from getting to the people."

Answers. The first step toward feeding the hungry in Africa is to help the vast numbers of subsistence farmers improve their soils, he says. Like all the world's farmers, these folks depend on a precious (and sometimes fragile) few inches of topsoil for their livelihood. "We teach them about no-till and cover crops, things that build the soil," Buffett says. "It's similar to what I'm doing on my farm, but it is done on a much different scale." ■

►**Below middle:** Howard Buffett's new book describes his experiences visiting countries where agriculture doesn't always meet the demand for food. ►**Below:** In contrast to Buffett's high-tech Illinois farm, harvest in many parts of the world still depends on an ancient, hands-on approach.

