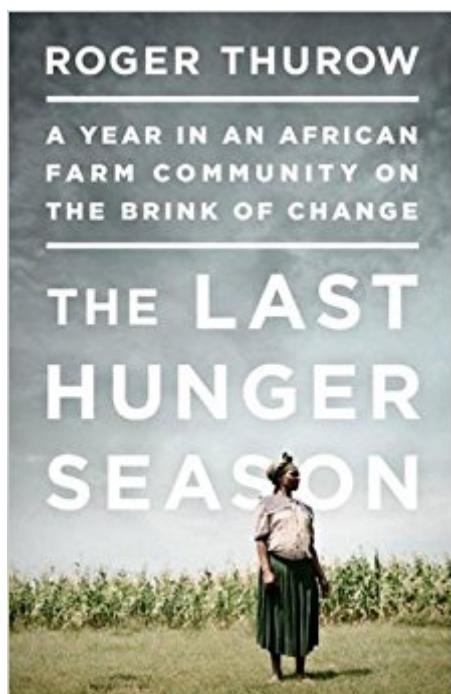


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# The Last Hunger Season: A Year In An African Farm Community On The Brink Of Change



## Synopsis

At 4:00 am, Leonida Wanyama lit a lantern in her house made of sticks and mud. She was up long before the sun to begin her farm work, as usual. But this would be no ordinary day, this second Friday of the new year. This was the day Leonida and a group of smallholder farmers in western Kenya would begin their exodus, as she said, “from misery to Canaan,” the land of milk and honey. African smallholder farmers, most of whom are women, know misery. They toil in a time warp, living and working essentially as their forebears did a century ago. With tired seeds, meager soil nutrition, primitive storage facilities, wretched roads, and no capital or credit, they harvest less than one-quarter the yields of Western farmers. The romantic ideal of African farmers—a rural villagers in touch with nature, tending bucolic fields—is in reality a horror scene of malnourished children, backbreaking manual work, and profound hopelessness. Growing food is their driving preoccupation, and still they don’t have enough to feed their families throughout the year. The *wanjala*—the annual hunger season that can stretch from one month to as many as eight or nine—abides. But in January 2011, Leonida and her neighbors came together and took the enormous risk of trying to change their lives. Award-winning author and world hunger activist Roger Thurow spent a year with four of them—Leonida Wanyama, Rasoa Wasike, Francis Mamati, and Zipporah Biketi—to intimately chronicle their efforts. In *The Last Hunger Season*, he illuminates the profound challenges these farmers and their families face, and follows them through the seasons to see whether, with a little bit of help from a new social enterprise organization called One Acre Fund, they might transcend lives of dire poverty and hunger. The daily dramas of the farmers’ lives unfold against the backdrop of a looming global challenge: to feed a growing population, world food production must nearly double by 2050. If these farmers succeed, so might we all.

## Book Information

Paperback: 328 pages

Publisher: PublicAffairs; First Trade Paper Edition edition (May 14, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 161039240X

ISBN-13: 978-1610392402

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 1 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 52 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #308,124 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #26 in Books > History > Africa > Kenya #77 in Books > History > Africa > East Africa #293 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Sociology > Medicine

## Customer Reviews

"The National""To understand their lives, the author ... takes us deep inside the smallholder's struggle.... Thurow has us hanging on the dramatic tensions affecting all four families: one finds the calf they'd depended on to cover future educational fees has died... Where Thurow is most effective is the interplay he weaves between hunger and policy - or its absence... Readers of "The Last Hunger Season" will find themselves getting caught up in these dilemmas, then breathing a sigh of relief to learn that the farmers Thurow followed in 2011 enjoyed reasonably good yields that year - seven to 20 bags of harvested maize apiece - thanks to One Acre's seeds and training." "Publishers Weekly""Empathetic and eye-opening.... Thurow paints a sobering but ultimately hopeful picture of a continuing food crisis in Africa and some of the things people are doing to mitigate it."

"Beliefnet""Awe-inspiring . . . A well-told story of scarcity and hope." "Financial Times""Part of the beauty of this book is that it is not the story of foreign aid workers. Nor indeed does the author, a former "Wall Street Journal" reporter with decades' experience of writing about Africa and agriculture, intrude. Rather it is the tale of villagers such as Wanyama who is grappling with dilemmas familiar to millions of rural and indeed urban Africans: whether to devote scant money to health, education for the children, or food.... This book shows us why history does not have to repeat itself." "Weekender""The Last Hunger Season" is as much a look at the distortions of agricultural development in Africa as it is a gritty underdog tale of hope and survival. The issue of malnutrition and hunger in children and adults living in impoverished conditions is a vast one. But Thurow does a good job not only touching on those problems but also deeply exploring the trials and tribulations associated with farming in Kenya. His voice is even-keeled, hopeful and respectful, and it's almost impo

Roger Thurow is a senior fellow for Global Agriculture and Food Policy at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. He was, for thirty years, a reporter at the Wall Street Journal. He is, with Scott Kilman, the author of *Enough: Why the Worldâ€”â€œ Poorest Starve in an Age of Plenty*, which won the Harry Chapin Why Hunger book award and was a finalist for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize and for the New York Public Library Helen Bernstein Book Award. He is a 2009

recipient of the Action Against Hunger Humanitarian Award. He lives near Chicago.

I'd recently finished Thurow's other book, *Enough: Why the World's Poorest Starve in an Age of Plenty*, and was fascinated. I was pleased to find out that he had another book that continued on the same themes from *Enough*. *The Last Hunger Season* does not disappoint in any way. To be clear, you do not have to have read the first one to read this one, but it is helpful for gaining some additional context. There are several things that I really liked about this book. For one, it is very well written. The stories of the four families come alive through their daily routines. You will find yourself pulling for the spring rains to arrive right along with them, cheering at their successes, and expressing frustration at their unforeseen problems. I also found the book pervaded by a deep sense of optimism. Certainly, a farmer in Africa has some very real challenges (including, but not limited to, bad governance at the country level, uncertain weather conditions, poor market data, infrastructure problems, etc.), but by the end of the book, you are left with an overarching excitement for the future. This excitement is in part due to the efforts of a business Thurow highlights, *The One Acre Fund*, that provides education, seeds, fertilizer, and expertise to communities of farmers. They (One Acre), in providing a consistent product (seeds, fertilizer, etc) at a manageable price, empower hundreds of farmers, and as the book illustrates, begins to radically change their lives. So why should you read this book? It will give you a much greater appreciation for the challenges African farmers face and how both individuals and business and aid entities are finding innovative ways to meet and defeat those challenges. It will also make you want to get involved, to add your voice to theirs in wanting better and more solutions; you will be frustrated at the slow-moving bureaucracy of the seed companies, and at the typical NGO that stays in the larger cities rather than going out where the people are, and at the lack of safety nets others take for granted (like crop insurance, etc). Thurow has given us a window into the life of a farmer in Africa, documenting a change sweeping four families lives. It is a powerful book. Read it and then pass it on!

After witnessing the irony of 'the hungry farmers' in western Kenya, Andrew Youn, then a MBA student, founded *One Acre Fund* in 2006 to help the extreme poor farmers, mostly women working on one acre of farm land, grow out of generations of poverty and hunger and let them prosper. The organization has grown from 38 to 180,000 farm families in Kenya, Rwanda, Brundi and Tanzania. They are expecting to serve over one million African substance farm families by 2020 (source: [oneacrefund.org](http://oneacrefund.org)). Roger Thurow followed four *One Acre Farm* farmers in Kenya for a year and

narrated often heart-breaking and also heart-warming stories in his inspiring book, The Last Hunger Season. The book is a must-read for anyone to better oneself as a human being. I have a small vegetable garden at the back of my house, and grow vegetables as a hobby. This remarkable experience observing the wonder of germination, the work of water and sun, and my own compost nutrients, delivers me the joy of harvest. This tiny 'farm' of mine has opened my eyes to see a side of the honest and simple lives of farmers reaping harvest after constant worries and challenges. Imagine you are the woman farmer raising 5 children, including an infant on your back, carries the responsibility to feed the family, send one or two children to school if you are lucky, and lead through the hunger season with a hope that everyone would survive. Reading the vivid description of worries and challenges of these neglected farmers is gut wrenching. Through the service of One Acre Fund, each farmer receives a repayable service bundle (improved seeds, fertilizer, weekly education, market facilitation), and they will break the cycle of extreme hunger and turn into successful business-minded farmers. Thurow points out the Green Revolution star countries are now facing with a real prospect of lesser yields due to diminishing land and dwindling water supplies. With additional 2.5 billion population growth by 2050, Africa with abundant available land and untapped water resources will emerge as the bread basket for the world by that time. What we need more urgently now is that both government policy makers and private sectors work together to assist smallholder farmers around the world to be efficient and productive, providing infrastructures and financing. We can learn from One Acre Fund who treats these farmers as business clients and provide them opportunities to thrive to cultivate human potential. I purchased several of this inspiring book and sent them to my closest friends to help them understand our global families and for better future for humanity.

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