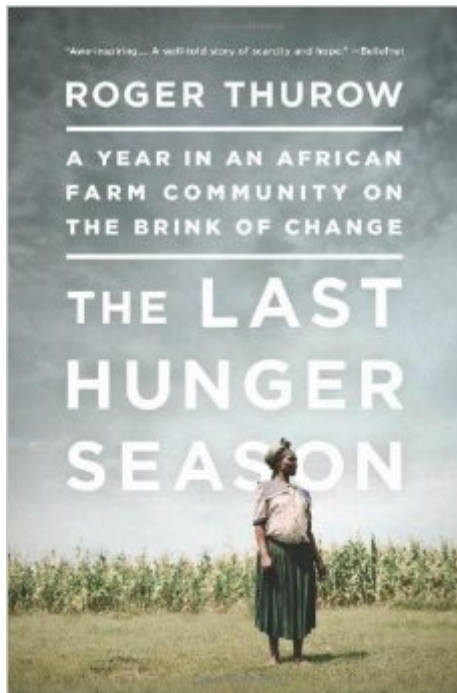


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# The Last Hunger Season: A Year In An African Farm Community On The Brink Of Change



## 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.” Africa’s 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’ “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

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## Customer Reviews

Chicago Council senior fellow and former Wall Street Journal writer Roger Thurow has published a new book that was on sale during the Council's pre-G8 event. I strongly recommend it. Thurow follows the lives of farm families in Western Kenya throughout the year 2011 as they struggle to overcome hunger. Their productivity is being greatly enhanced through the "One Acre Fund" () - a social enterprise founded by Andrew Youn, an American son of Korean immigrant parents that now serves 50,000 families. Youn has been called the "Paul Farmer of Agriculture" - an individual of unyielding persistence as he and his team overcome logistical barriers to deliver improved seeds and fertilizer (on credit), training and farm insurance to farmers throughout his area. Those working in African development will recognize much of what One Acre Fund does in Kenya: awakening people to a new possibility, training local facilitators, providing skills in row-planting and microdose fertilizer. Many will also recognize that - as impoverished as the Kenyan villages are - farmers have a profound commitment to securing quality secondary education for their children as their highest aspiration. Like Steinbeck, Thurow follows the experiences of four families as they live through the major phases of the cropping year: the land preparation, the planting, the "hunger season," the harvest, and the second planting. He also neatly folds in the historic events unfolding beyond the villages - the famine in Northern Kenya receiving foreign food aid even as Western Kenya has a bumper harvest it cannot sell, Tony Hall fasting to force Congress to not cut food security funding, and the G8 in Paris giving little priority to food security as the global recession deepens.

Being from the farm, I found Roger Thurow's book, *The Last Hunger Season*, to be a challenge for every human being to help out their 'neighbor' to eliminate hunger. In our world of plenty, no one should be going hungry or be starving to death. Yet as our world grows in population, there is a need to increase productivity worldwide. Through the brain-child operation, One Acre Fund, administered by Andrew Youn, a social entrepreneur who was earning his MBA at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, Kenya's smallholder farmers were taught how to manage and grow bigger and better crops to sustain them through the hunger season. Though Andrew wasn't a farmer, he did know how to manage. In his mind, "The existence of hungry farmers is completely crazy. It's mind-boggling. A hunger season shouldn't exist." I totally agree. It's

unbelievable, yet it was happening. This book is the story of four smallholder farmers that Roger Thurow followed for a year, throughout all the different seasons of farming. It started out as a picture of malnourished children, backbreaking manual labor (mostly done by the women), meager provisions from the crops, the stress of financial concerns for schooling their children, and the mountainous hopelessness of going through the wanjala-a hunger season that could stretch from one month to nine, depending on the year. With the help of One Acre Fund, they were hoping to overcome the oppressive poverty and hunger. As a former farm girl, it was a thrilling and educational read to see how all the monumental red tape and access to good seed was a constant concern and how One Acre Fund was willing to stay the course, working out problems and issues that arose. Others had tried, failed and left.

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