

- poverty, caused by the unequal distribution of resources within a society or between societies
- natural disasters, such as floods, tidal waves, tornadoes and drought
- wars (especially civil wars) and other forms of violent social upheaval
- crop failures, caused by locusts and other insects or parasites.

Another factor, fully described by Keesing and Strathern,²⁸ is the international *political economy* of food production and consumption. They note how in many parts of the Third World, both under colonialism and afterwards, people were encouraged and sometimes forced to grow commodities for export (such as tobacco, sugar cane, coffee or cotton) rather than staple foods for internal consumption. In large areas of the developing world, more and more land was devoted to producing these ‘cash crops’ for export. In the 1970s, for example, cash crops occupied an estimated 55 per cent of the cropland in the Philippines, 80 per cent in Mauritius and 50 per cent of all cultivated land in Senegal. Many developing countries are therefore at the mercy of fluctuations in the world market for their cash crops, and are also increasingly reliant on imported food for subsistence. Furthermore, advertising from firms in the industrialized countries has promoted the use of less nutritious and more expensive artificial foods, such as soft drinks, canned foods and infant formula feeds (see below). In many countries an overemphasis on the production of raw materials, such as coal, copper, tin, gold or oil, or even on the tourist industry, may play a similar role to cash crops: increasing dependence on international markets, and reducing the land and population available for food production.

Recently, more attention has been paid to the phenomenon of *globalization* (see Chapter 12) and its effect on global diet.^{29,30} This process involves the diffusion of Western modes of food production, marketing and consumption to many parts of the world, especially to poorer

countries. One effect of this is to concentrate power over these processes into fewer and fewer hands, especially in the Western corporate sector. This in turn implies a shift in power from the producer of food – the farmer, peasant, or agricultural worker – to the distributor of that food (often a multinational corporation or ‘agribusiness’).²⁹ Overall, the effects of this process on nutrition include the rapid change of centuries-old traditional diets, the introduction of a variety of nutritionally inadequate fast foods (‘burgerization’²⁹), and a shift towards high-fat, high-salt, and high-calorie diets as part of this ‘nutrition transition’³⁰ (see below).

In many cases of malnutrition, therefore, the causes lie outside the control of individuals, their families and their communities. Thus cultural factors, as well as personal factors such as ignorance or idiosyncrasy, are only one part (though they may be an important part) of the complex mix of influences on the individual that determine whether his or her diet is nutritionally adequate or not.



Figure 3.2 Malnutrition is a major cause of death among children in developing countries. (Source: © Jann Banning/Panos Pictures. Reproduced with permission.)