INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Oxfam America Hunger Banquet event. We are here today because more than 2.5 billion people live in poverty.

[PAUSE]

Over one billion people suffer from chronic hunger.

[PAUSE]

A child dies from hunger or a preventable disease every 3.4 seconds. That’s 25,000 children a day.

[PAUSE]

You may think hunger is about too many people and too little food. That is not the case. Our rich and bountiful planet produces enough food to feed every woman, man, and child on earth. Hunger is about power. Its roots lie in inequalities in access to education and resources. The results are illiteracy, poverty, war, and the inability of families to grow or buy food. Today you join Oxfam’s fight against hunger and poverty.

Tonight we want to focus particularly on the impact that climate change is having on poor people.

From floods in Bangladesh to droughts in Kenya, glacier melts in Peru to hurricanes in the Caribbean, people in poor countries are already suffering from the effects of climate change.

More than 200 years since the Industrial Revolution, our growing reliance on fossil fuels has changed the climate. The same fuels that power our businesses, fire up our cars, and keep us warm at night have produced greenhouse gases, which are slowly warming our planet.

The rising temperature is creating more extreme weather patterns, melting glaciers, and causing floods and droughts. In some regions, climate change is aggravating existing problems and increasing the threat of conflict.

Worse yet, it’s the world’s poorest people—those least responsible for generating greenhouse gases—who are experiencing the most devastating effects.

Least prepared to respond to the unavoidable changes, they also lack the political power, money, and technology necessary to survive.

One of climate change’s most savage impacts on humanity in the near future is likely to be an increase of hunger. Some of the world’s staple crops, such as maize and rice, are very susceptible to rising temperatures and to more unpredictable and extreme seasons. Almost without exception, the countries that already struggle to feed their people are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

That’s where large, industrialized countries like the US come in. As one of the world’s biggest producers of greenhouse gas emissions, the US must take responsibility for its actions by dramatically reducing emissions and providing financial assistance to help the most vulnerable countries adapt. It’s time for us to stop harming and start helping.

Your presence here today shows that you are concerned. You want to learn more. You want to make a difference. And we want to help.

Over the more than 35 years of Oxfam America’s work, millions of dollars have been raised to support human rights and an end to poverty. Millions of people like you have participated in Oxfam America Hunger Banquet events or skipped meals to acknowledge the plight of the world’s hungry.

Since 1970, Oxfam America has been working with poor communities around the world to make a difference. We continue to promote change “from the bottom up” through hundreds of grassroots organizations around the world. Oxfam doesn’t impose solutions. We believe that people have the power, the right, and the understanding to create solutions for their own communities. Oxfam provides financial and moral support and networking assistance to enable communities to control their own futures. Let me give you an example, related to this issue of climate change.

The Miskitos, indigenous people of Central America, have been living and farming according to natural rhythms ever since their state was formed in the early 1600s. But now something is going badly wrong.

In the past few years they have no longer been able to predict the seasons, so they don’t know when to plant. Traditional signs found in nature—white cranes, flowering avocado plants, silver fish, and flashes of lightning—are no longer heralding the rains.
“The summer now is winter,” says Howard Fernández, a farmer in the remote San Andrés de Bocay community in northeastern Nicaragua. “April used to be summer, but it rained the entire month. In May—wintertime—it doesn’t rain. We listen to the thunder, we see the lightning that should let us know that the rain is coming, but it is not coming. Because of this climate change, we are suffering the decrease of our farm’s production.”

The changing climate is having a devastating effect on the Miskito people, who live in wooden huts and subsist on crops planted on a couple hectares (about 5 acres) of land and food hunted from the jungle and rivers. Already among the poorest and most marginalized groups in the country, they are now on the front lines of this new threat, which is hitting them practically and psychologically. As well as badly reducing their rice crop, the drought of 2007 meant the river levels were much lower than usual, affecting the communities’ vital transport artery. And then, after the drought, Hurricane Felix hit the Miskitos that September.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has reported decreasing rainfall patterns in Nicaragua. The panel’s report also shows how the remote areas where these Native Americans live are becoming increasingly vulnerable to the impacts of hurricanes, which are predicted to increase as a result of climate change. Oxfam is working with communities on a hurricane early warning system, which involves measuring river water levels and predicting possible flooding, to help them cope with these changes in weather.

This is one example among many to demonstrate the sustainable solutions that Oxfam America and its partners are able to achieve.

Oxfam also supports other groups, including the following:

- Women in coastal Mississippi, who are working to rebuild their community after Hurricane Katrina, are advocating at the local government level for evacuation plans that include low-income neighborhoods.
- Farmers in Gansu Province, China, are working to diversify their crops to include more drought-resistant plants.
- In North Darfur, Sudan, a community-led project combines traditional water conservation and seed-sowing methods, along with home gardens and new cultivation techniques, to protect village food supplies during times of hunger and conflict.

Altogether, Oxfam America supports partners around the world, and as part of Oxfam International, we work in over 100 countries. While we are committed to our community-based work, we have found that there are also larger barriers that keep people from thriving. Our policy and advocacy work allows us to challenge the national and international laws and policies that reinforce poverty. We also educate the US public on hunger and poverty issues, which is what this Oxfam America Hunger Banquet event is all about.

This event is a metaphor for how food and other resources are inequitably distributed in the world. As such, an Oxfam America Hunger Banquet event can only touch upon the issues. We cannot recreate the many complex ways poverty manifests itself. We will not have time to go into all the problems associated with lack of access to health care, education, or the tools to adapt to a changing climate, and the realities of the day-to-day struggle for survival.

The one thing I would like you to remember is this: Everyone on earth has the same basic needs; it is only our circumstances—where we live and the culture into which we are born—that differ. Some are born into relative prosperity and security, while millions—through no choice of their own—are born into poverty.

As each of us walked in the door here today, we drew our lot at random. Look around and you can see that equality and balance don’t exist here.

Please note: No one section of this room represents a single country. While the US is one of the wealthiest countries on earth, almost 39 million Americans live in poverty. Many Americans are already suffering from the effects of climate change. Stark inequalities prevail everywhere.

Now I would like to introduce you to the three segments of our world. But remember—it’s too easy to measure our world purely in economic terms. It is really about each person’s ability to achieve a sense of security and to access resources.

[MOVE NEAR HIGH-INCOME GROUP]

If you are sitting over here, you represent the 15 percent of the world’s population with a per capita income of $12,000 or more. You are fortunate enough to be able to afford a nutritious daily diet. Since many of you exceed your daily requirement of calories, you are likely to face health problems such as heart disease and diabetes.

But most of you don’t worry about getting health care. You have access to the best medical care in the world. It’s a given that your children will attend school; the only uncertainty is how many years they will study after high school. Access to credit? You turn down more offers than you can count. You and your family live in a comfortable and secure home. You own at least one car and probably two televisions. When you take your annual two-week vacation, you don’t worry about your job disappearing in your absence.

You probably do not rely on the land to feed and support yourself and your family, so you are little affected when the world’s changing climate causes unpredictable crop yields. If a natural disaster were to strike near your home, you would have the
resources to protect yourself and your family and to rebuild. If a drought were to strike, you would still have access to water. You have access to virtually everything you need and the security to enjoy it.

[MOVE NEAR MIDDLE-INCOME GROUP]
If you are sitting here, you represent roughly 35 percent of the world’s population. You earn between $987 and $11,999 a year. The levels of access and security you enjoy vary greatly. You live on the edge. For many, it would take losing only one harvest to drought or a serious illness to throw you into poverty.

You probably own no land and may work as a day laborer, a job that pays a paltry amount—but it’s better than nothing. Your small income allows for some use of electricity and a few years of schooling for your children—especially if they are boys.

Alternatively, you may have been forced to leave your family to go work in the city because unpredictable weather patterns caused by climate change are making your harvests less and less productive every year.

The erratic temperature and rainfall have made it almost impossible to determine when your growing season begins. You hope that the money you earn from your less-than-minimum-wage job as domestic help or a sweatshop worker will eventually allow you to move back home and make a better life for your family.

[MOVE NEAR LOW-INCOME GROUP]
If you are sitting on the floor, you represent the majority of the world’s population—roughly 50 percent. Your average income is less than $986 a year—about $2.70 a day—although many of you earn much less.

Every day is a struggle to meet your family’s basic needs. Finding food, water, and shelter can consume your entire day. For many of you women, it would not be uncommon to have to walk five to 10 miles every day to get water, and lately you have to walk farther and farther to get water, as droughts caused by climate change have been increasing. You then spend several more hours working in the fields, and of course, take care of the children.

Many of you are frequently hungry. With increasingly volatile weather patterns as a result of climate change, your gardens are less and less reliable. It is quite likely that you don’t get the minimum number of calories your hardworking life requires. Many of you are homeless or living in structures so flimsy that a hard rain or strong wind could cause a major catastrophe.

Even though education is the single most powerful weapon against poverty, school is a luxury few of your children will ever experience. Most girls don’t even bother to dream about school.

Adequate health care is out of the question for many of you in this group. For most of you, early death is all too familiar, with many mothers expecting to lose one or two children before they turn five.

If you are lucky enough to work, you are probably a tenant farmer who must give your landowner 75 percent of your harvest. Or you may get occasional work as a day laborer at a large plantation growing bananas, sugar, or coffee for export. You reap few benefits from these crops; you’d prefer to grow food your children could eat.

Hundreds of millions of people are already suffering damage from a rapidly changing climate, which is frustrating their efforts to escape poverty. One report estimates that 26 million people have already been displaced because of climate change. By 2015, 375 million people may be affected by climate-related disasters. By 2050, 200 million people may be on the move each year because of hunger, environmental degradation, and loss of land. Several major cities that are dependent on water from mountain ranges face collapse.

Meet Fahima Begum. Fahima lives in the coastal region of Satkhira, Bangladesh. Floodwaters from the sea have brought salt into the rice paddies. Many families have lost their land and have had to migrate to towns.

“My husband used to be a rice farmer [until the salinated land was taken over for shrimp farms],” Fahima says. “He had to go to the Sundarbans forest to collect honey. One afternoon three years ago, he found a beehive. He went to climb the tree, but then he was caught by a tiger and killed. He was 30 years old.

“It’s very difficult to send my children to school. There are no fish in the river, no jobs in the village. Now we are suffering a lot, especially due to the lack of clean water. When the embankment broke, salt water got into the fresh water. We collected the water from more than a kilometer away, near the primary school—about a mile away. My daughter brings the water from the pond. My children are sick. On one hand, they starve, and the water makes it worse.

“We have a lot of pain. If I told you everything, you would hardly be able to walk with the burden of my story. How do we survive these days? Most of the people have moved away now. Maybe I could leave. If I can’t provide food for my children, can’t give them good shelter, sometimes it comes into my mind because there is no other way. But I don’t know where I would go, because I haven’t even crossed the river. I don’t know how to go, because I don’t know where to go.”
Now I have some news that will affect several of you. As we’ve said, no one can choose the circumstances into which he or she is born. Some people have the good fortune to change their lives for the better, but for most the circumstances of life are determined by factors outside of their control.

These six people live in Papua New Guinea. [ADDRESS THE SIX PEOPLE FROM THE MIDDLE-INCOME GROUP] You are part of the cultural group called the Carteret Islanders—a community of 2,500 people living on the Carteret Islands, a remote set of islands almost 80 miles away from any large body of land. Your home is on one of six small islands that surround an atoll made of sand. Their highest point lies just five feet above sea level. You have fought for more than 20 years against the intruding Pacific Ocean, building sea walls and planting mangroves. But within just one generation, your island’s shoreline has receded over 60 feet. During storm surges, salt water washes away your homes, destroys your vegetable gardens, and contaminates your freshwater supplies. The rising sea has had devastating effects on the agriculture you depend on to survive. When it’s high tide, you can see salt water bubbling out of the land. Your islands are like so many other small islands and coastal communities that are so vulnerable to rising sea levels caused by climate change. Even though you and your community have a carbon footprint among the lowest in the world, you will be among the first to have to abandon your island and home because of rising seas caused by emissions from other nations.

Do ordinary people in the US know how their carbon emissions are devastating your family? Would they care if they did?

I ask that the six of you take a seat on the floor.

[A VOLUNTEER AS SEN SLES]

*The following scenario can be acted out by someone in your group who has rehearsed this beforehand.*

**Sen Sles:** My name is Sen Sles. I live in Cambodia. I feel bad; I have a very high temperature but have no money to buy more medicine. I have malaria. I caught malaria from the mosquitoes in the forest. I own a very small plot of land, which normally is enough to feed my family, but this year the irregular flooding destroyed almost everything, and I had no choice but to enter the forest. I have to collect firewood to sell because I lost all my assets when my rice paddy flooded.

**Emcee:** I am sorry I don’t have better news for you. Global warming is happening faster than anyone predicted, and other countries are not slowing their emissions fast enough. Not only does climate change increase the volatile weather that caused the flood that harmed your rice paddy, but it also contributed to your malaria. Diseases like malaria and dengue fever are most sensitive to climate change, and with warmer temperatures and increased rainfall, mosquitoes carrying malaria are able to breed more and survive longer. The greatest injustice is that you are not the one producing the emissions that are creating this change. There is an unequal distribution of those creating the emissions and those feeling the impacts of climate change. The US contributes about 23 percent of the world’s emissions while representing only 5 percent of its population.

**Sen Sles:** How is this fair? Every member of my family has either dengue fever or malaria. We can’t depend on our rice paddy any longer, and everyone is too sick to work on plantations. Why is my family paying the price for developed nations? Something has to change.

[TURN BACK TO ADDRESS ENTIRE ROOM.]

This is just a small slice of life as it plays out each day around the globe.

Now we invite you to eat.

Those of you in the high-income group will be served a nutritious meal. [YOU MAY MENTION MEAL.] Those in the middle-income group may proceed to the buffet tables, where rice and beans [IF THIS IS THE CASE] are available. People in the low-income group seated on the floor, help yourselves to rice and water. [YOU CAN ALSO SERVE RICE IN LARGE BOWLS PLACED ON THE FLOOR AND HAVE PEOPLE SERVE EACH OTHER.]

Bon appetit!

Please join me in a moment of silence to reflect on our experience here today.

[MOMENT OF SILENCE]

[SHARING PERIOD: EMCEE WALKS AMONG AUDIENCE MEMBERS, ASKING PEOPLE HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT BEING IN WHICHEVER GROUP THEY ARE IN.]
CONCLUSION

Here’s a new version of an old story:

They say, “Give a man a fish and he’ll eat for a day, but teach a man to fish and he’ll eat for a lifetime.”

But what if he cannot access the river? What if there are no longer any fish because the river has been poisoned?

Who controls the river?

Perhaps there is a factory upstream releasing dioxin into the river. Maybe the government has approved construction of a hydroelectric dam, flooding a valley and displacing thousands of villagers. Perhaps a commercial fishing company is overfishing, placing the livelihoods of local fishermen at risk.

Or, perhaps increasingly erratic weather caused by climate change has dried up the river or flooded it, washing away an entire village. It’s the story of why a person living in poverty is 20 times more vulnerable to humanitarian disasters.

This is not a theoretical story. You heard about the Miskito people in Central America. And about the Carteret Islanders of Papua New Guinea. It’s also about this country—about folks in the Gulf Coast and in Alaska. Increasingly, it’s a story that connects all of us here on the planet.

Who controls the river?

That goes to the heart of Oxfam’s mission, and of this Hunger Banquet event: understanding what it means to end hunger, poverty, and social injustice. I believe, quite simply, that the question of injustice—whether it be social, economic, or political injustice—goes to the heart of the question, who controls the river?

I think the reason why the Oxfam America Hunger Banquet event is such a powerful event is because every person on this earth understands, at a most basic level, why it is important for people to have food. We all have to eat.

We are probably here today because we believe that everyone has the right to eat, the right to NOT go hungry. But if we really want to solve world hunger, we must ask why are so many people hungry when the world has such an abundant harvest? As we learned at the opening of this banquet, there is enough food to feed everyone.

Who controls the river?

Hunger is not really about food.

Hunger is NOT about food.

Hunger is about power, and the fact that millions do not have access to what they need to survive. Access to things like land, markets to sell their goods, a decent job, credit, education, peace, and political freedom.

And, increasingly, it’s about access to their own natural environments—land, rivers, coastal areas—without those environments being destroyed by the impacts of carbon emissions.

Hunger is about power. Which means that if we really want to end hunger, we need to deal with the hard questions about root causes; we need to understand who controls the river. And I would say that we need to stretch in our understanding of who controls the river. To recognize that, yes, it is the institutions of power—the companies, the governments, the international fiscal institutions—that too often decide the direct fate of the river. You need to challenge those institutions.

But this isn’t about guilt. It’s about seizing power and becoming active in recreating society. We need to use our own power to transform the existing power structures that currently are creating a world of hunger, vulnerability, and deprivation amidst a world of plenty.
It’s about joining a worldwide movement to use political action to stabilize our planet’s rising temperature. Putting a human face on that struggle—putting the voices and needs of the most vulnerable first.

It’s about demanding justice. Demanding that we do the following:

- **Stop harming.** Commit to reducing emissions in order to avoid a temperature rise of 2°C, or 3.6°F—the point at which the world will experience huge shocks to our water resources, food production, sea levels, and ecosystem.
- **Start helping.** Commit to helping poor people in developing countries adapt to a changing climate—by providing support that protects them from disasters, aids them in growing harder crops, and helps them diversify ways of making a living.

So, what can we do?

First, we can educate ourselves and others about these issues. Oxfam has many campaigns that we need your help on, and they are all interlinked: one is our Fast campaign, another is our Humanitarian campaign, another is our Extractive Industries campaign; and the one that I am going to ask for your help on right now is the Climate Change campaign.

Educate yourselves in all sorts of ways. Oxfam has lots of information on its web site. Learn about the issues of climate change, understand the root causes of poverty, and notice how they regularly impact your own life.

Second, it is important to seek out like-minded individuals, whether students, neighbors, professors, family, or friends. This will give you a needed support network and also allow you to have fun—something vital when doing this important work!

And while you’re at it, speak to folks who may not be like-minded. Unusual allies are sometimes the best allies. In the Climate Change campaign, for example, we are finding strong voices within the US military speaking out about the destabilizing impacts of climate change, adding to the call for immediate action. So speak to your friends, but speak to others as well—you may find common ground.

Last, think about ways that you can get actively involved in creating real change—whether by working to decrease your own carbon footprint; making your schools, workplaces, or places of worship more energy efficient; organizing an Oxfam America Hunger Banquet event yourselves; lobbying your local and state representatives to pass laws aimed at reducing our carbon emissions and helping other nations adapt; or using other creative methods you might invent. Oxfam has toolkits, action guides, and all kinds of free resources to help you out. Use Oxfam as a resource!

The first step is not that hard. Join us! By adding your voice to Oxfam’s, you’ll be helping in numerous ways; and by joining our Climate Change campaign, you’ll be helping to ensure that those least responsible are able to adapt to climate change. Please sign the postcard being handed out. You will get updates and calls to action on climate change.

Seize your power. Be the change(make the change—you wish to see in the world. Become that river—letting justice roll down like a mighty stream.

Together, we can make a difference.

Thank you for coming.
To make your Oxfam America Hunger Banquet event more interesting for your guests, we have developed Character Tickets. Print them out from our Web site onto colored paper and have guests draw the Character Tickets randomly as they arrive. Use a different color for each income group. Below are sample Character Tickets.

**High-income group**
My name is John. My parents emigrated from Italy and raised my brothers and me in a tenement in Chicago. I worked my way through college and law school, taking on a variety of odd jobs, and then started my own law practice. I am now not only able to live in a fine home and travel extensively, but I’ve also been able to “give back” by covering college tuition for high school graduates with exceptional promise who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Middle-income group**
My name is Dully. I live with my family in India. Before my mother joined a women’s group, we had no money to buy medicine when my brothers and I would get sick. My mother and her friends talked about problems with their husbands: they wouldn’t help out at home, they would spend all their money on themselves, and sometimes they would beat the women. But the women were very brave, and they formed a women’s group to raise and sell fish. They earn their own income, and the village men’s group cooperates with them. Sometimes, my father even helps cook dinner.

**Low-income group**
My name is Ismatullah. I am 16 years old and work as a shopkeeper in the village of Qadis in Afghanistan. Prospects for my three-month-old kiosk don’t look good. Of the 300 shops that used to be open in the town, only 20 are still in business. It is hard to see how I’m going to earn enough money selling packages of pasta and bars of Raana soap.

Go to oxfamamerica.org/fast for more than 50 different Character Tickets. You’ll also find alternate Hunger Banquet event scripts focusing on food crises, humanitarian emergencies, and more.