



Press Summary

The state of food insecurity in the world

1999

Undernourishment around the world

Almost 800 million people in the developing world do not have enough to eat. Another 34 million people in the industrialized countries and countries in transition also suffer from chronic food insecurity.

If all the world's undernourished people were gathered together, the population of the continent of the hungry would dwarf that of every other continent except Asia. The hunger of these people is not a transitory condition. It is chronic. It is debilitating. Sometimes it is deadly. It blights the lives of all who are affected and undermines

national economic development across much of the developing world.

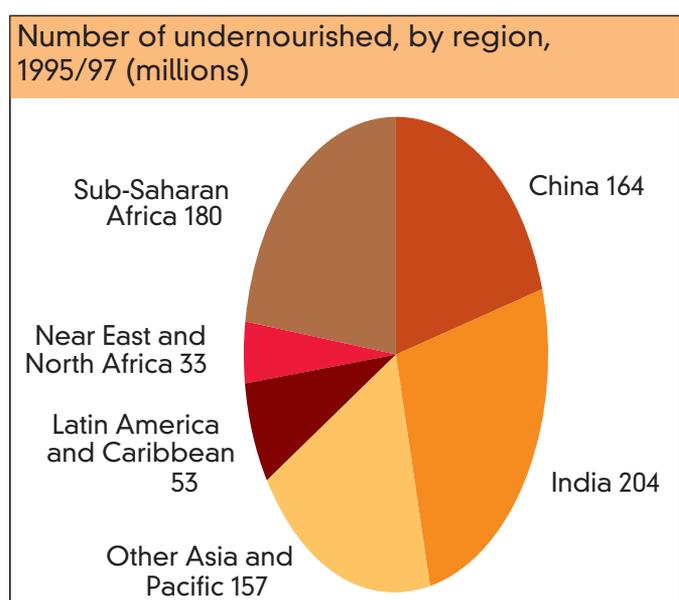
The gains are encouraging but far from satisfactory. The number of undernourished people fell by 40 million between 1990/92 and 1995/97. However, the momentum is too slow and the progress too uneven to achieve the goal set by the World Food Summit in 1996: to reduce the total to around 400 million by the year 2015. In fact, the number of hungry people is growing in many parts of the world.

Counting and locating the hungry

Almost two-thirds of the undernourished people in the world live in Asia and the Pacific. India alone has more undernourished people than (204 million) than all of sub-Saharan Africa combined. With India's neighbours added in, the South Asian sub-region accounts for more than one-third of the hungry people in the developing world, while another 30 percent live in Southeast and East Asia. Yet moderate achievements were made in the 1980-96 period, with the number of countries making progress (10) slightly exceeding those losing ground (8).

Sub-Saharan Africa is home to almost a quarter of the developing world's hungry people, and it is the region making the least progress. In fact, 28 countries lost ground during 1980-96, while just 10 made progress. The proportion of undernourished people is higher in Central, East and Southern Africa than in West Africa. Almost half of the population in these three sub-regions is undernourished.

Serious hunger afflicts fewer people in Latin America and the Caribbean. Most of the countries in this region fall into the moderately low category, meaning 5 to 19 percent of the people are undernourished. Yet progress towards a sufficient diet for all has stalled in this region, with 16 countries losing ground compared to 8 making progress.



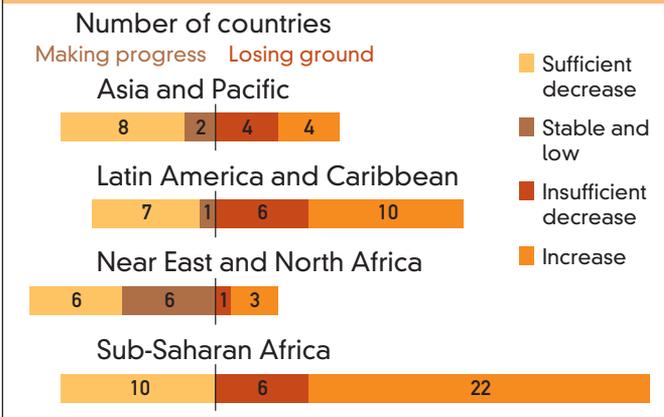
The countries of the Near East are concentrated in the extremely low and very low hunger categories, with malnourishment afflicting less than 5 percent of the people. This region also made the most progress in the 1980-96 period, with 12 countries making progress and 4 losing ground. Yet in two countries, Yemen and Afghanistan, 35 percent or more of the population is undernourished.

Progress and setbacks in developing countries

According to the most recent data available, the number of undernourished people in the developing world has been reduced to 790 million, 40 million less than the number estimated at the time of the World Food Summit in 1996. But the pace of progress has not been fast enough to reach the goal of around 400 million by 2015 set by the Summit. In fact, if the present trend continues, with reductions of approximately 8 million a year in the ranks of the undernourished, the total in 2015 will be 638 million.

Progress in combating hunger has also been very uneven. Between 1991 and 1996, the proportion of the population going hungry increased in 27 countries. In another 32 countries, the proportion either remained steady or shrank too slowly to offset growth in the total population. Only 37 countries succeeded in bringing down the proportion rapidly enough to reduce the absolute number.

Undernourishment in countries where hunger is decreasing either fast enough or insufficiently to reach the World Food Summit Target, 1980-1996



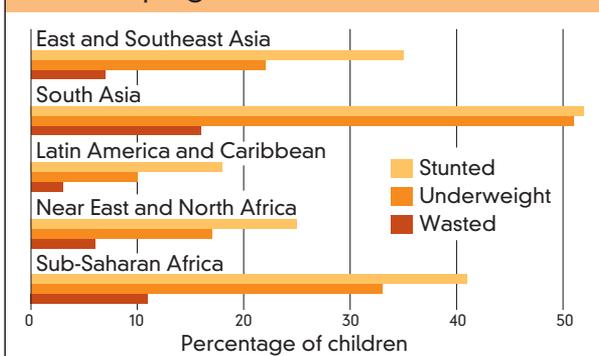
Undernourishment in developed countries

First estimates indicate that around 34 million undernourished people live in the industrialized countries and countries in transition. More than three-quarters of them – 26 million – are concentrated in the countries in transition of Eastern Europe and the area of the former USSR.

The proportion of undernourished people is very low or extremely low in all industrialized countries and 12 of the 27 countries in transition. But significantly higher rates exist in 15 of the countries in transition, mainly those belonging to the area of the former USSR and the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Nutritional status and vulnerability: Well-being of young children

Undernutrition among children under five in developing countries

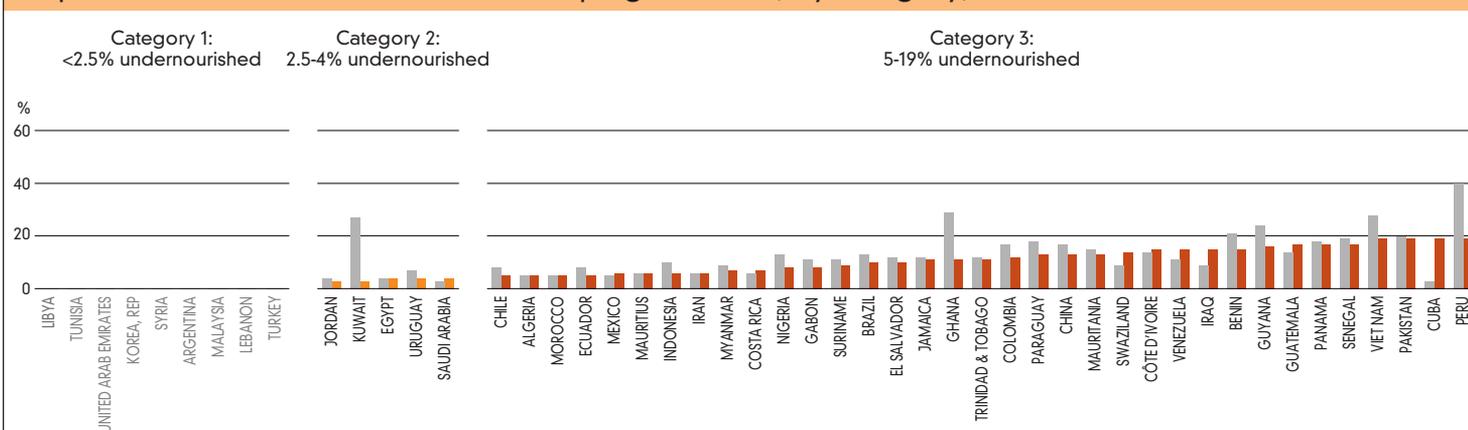


Children are the most nutritionally vulnerable group in the developing world. According to surveys conducted between 1987 and 1998, two out of five of these children are stunted (low height for age), one in three are underweight (low weight for age) and one in ten are wasted (low weight for height).

The numbers vary considerably among regions. In South Asia, half the children under five are underweight, compared with 33 percent in Africa and 21 percent in East and Southeast Asia. The incidence is lowest in Latin America and the Caribbean.

With the highest proportion of undernutrition and a very large population of children under five, South Asia accounts for almost half of all the world's underweight and stunted children.

Proportions of undernourished in developing countries, by category, 1990/92 and 1995/97



Dynamics of change: Factors that bring about change

Conditions vary considerably from one place to another, and so do the combinations of factors that leave particular population groups vulnerable to poverty and hunger. Usually many different demographic, environmental, economic, social and political elements are involved.

In the follow-up to the World Food Summit, considerable effort has gone into developing effective methods and indicators to monitor these factors. *The state of food insecurity in the world 1999* offers some preliminary examples of what can be learned by monitoring indicators as diverse as population growth and illiteracy rates, crop yields and access to paved roads, or growth in GDP and degree of land degradation. The report highlights two countries in each of the four regions of the developing world – the country where the prevalence of hunger has been reduced rapidly and the one that has suffered the worst setbacks between 1980 and 1996.

Asia: Economic growth spurs improved food security

A period of rapid economic growth has resulted in major gains in food security across most of Asia and the Pacific. Cambodia led the way with a 29 percentage-point drop in undernutrition, and many other countries in the region also showed strong reductions.

Latin America and the Caribbean: Progress, setbacks

In most South American countries, levels of hunger are already low or rapidly declining. In Central America, on the other hand, levels are increasing in several countries. In the Caribbean, several countries have experienced increases in undernourishment since 1980.

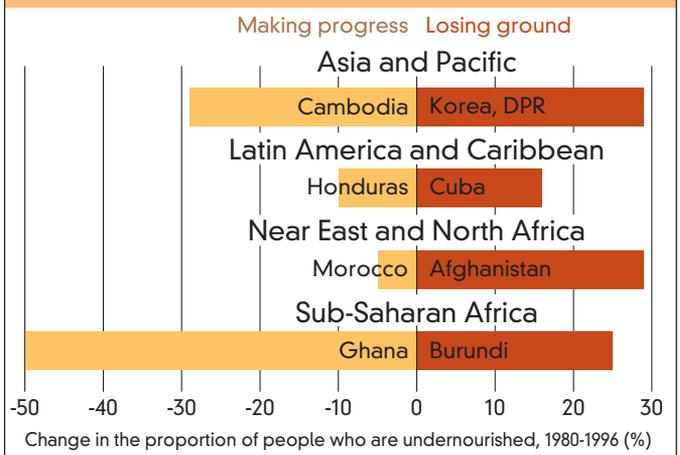
Near East: Steady improvements despite trouble spots

This region accounts for 10 of the 14 developing countries where undernourishment affects less than 5 percent of the population. Morocco's decline, from 10 to 5 percent, represented the best progress among this group of good performers. Significant increases occurred only in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Sub-Saharan Africa: Problems overshadow gains

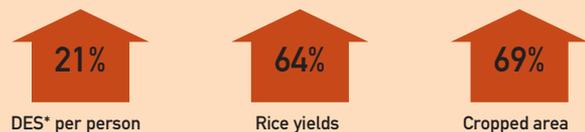
With Ghana leading the way, eight countries in West Africa reduced hunger significantly between 1980 and 1996. The picture was very different in Central, East and Southern Africa, where the proportions and numbers of undernourished people generally increased.

Countries in each region with the largest reductions and increases in undernourishment, 1980-1996



Cambodia – reaping the dividends of peace

More land is being farmed, more food is being produced and many fewer people are going hungry in Cambodia, as the country rebounds from decades of conflict. Between 1980 and 1996, farmers almost doubled the area on which they were growing crops. Because of gains in food production, Cambodians are eating substantially better, even though the population has continued to grow rapidly and food imports have declined.



Korea, DPR – a bitter harvest

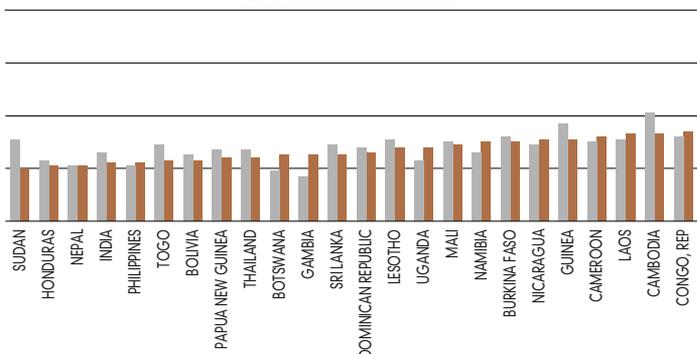
The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has been hit hard during the 1990s by floods, drought and the collapse of its special trading relationships with China and the former USSR. The impact has been devastating both to food production and to the nutritional status of the population. Massive food aid was provided, but logistical problems made it difficult to reach all people in need.



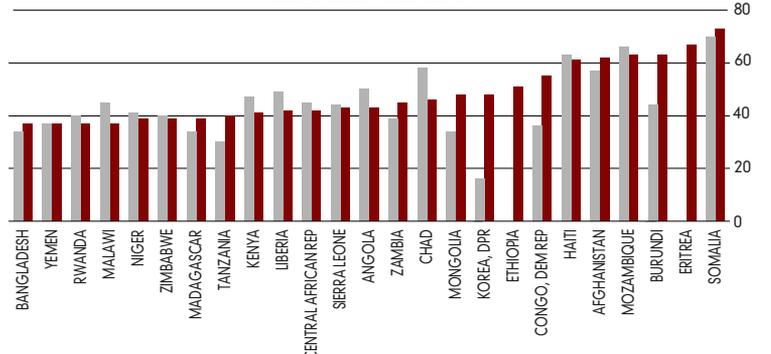
* DES: dietary energy supply

Grey bars: 1990/92 Coloured bars: 1995/97

Category 4:
20-34% undernourished



Category 5:
≥35% undernourished



The way ahead – Meeting the challenge

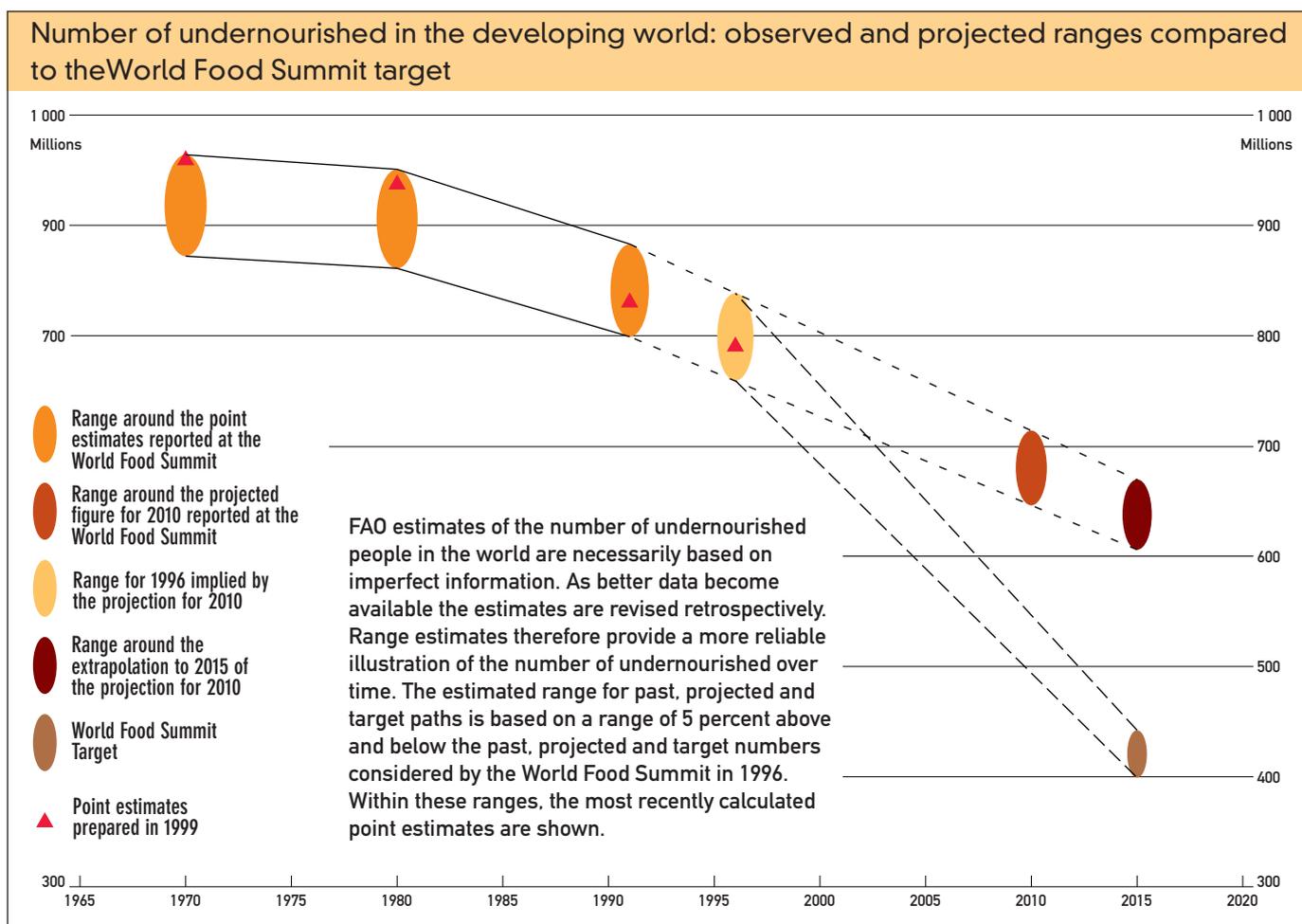
It is clear that there is no single prescription for combating hunger. Policies and strategies must address both the causes and the effects of food insecurity in order to build an appropriate framework for concrete action.

In societies at peace, poverty and marginalization are the root causes of hunger. Where there is no peace, physical destruction and the displacement of people are additional causes.

Action is needed most urgently in countries where chronic food insecurity is most prevalent or is increasing. These are very poor countries whose populations are predominantly rural and largely dependent on agricul-

ture for a living. We have the tools to achieve the World Food Summit target of halving the number of undernourished globally by 2015. The next step is translating the goal into concrete objectives at the local, national and regional levels where people and their leaders can take action.

In the spirit of the Summit's call for the elimination of food insecurity around the world, it is not enough to meet the numerical target simply as a result of rapid progress in a few very large countries. This would be unfair to those living in many other countries. They also have the right to be free from the diminished lives and premature death that come from food insecurity.



These and other graphics can be downloaded in PDF format from the FAO website, www.fao.org

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