

The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2013

Questions and Answers

1. How much progress has been made in the fight against hunger?

Current estimates of the prevalence of undernourishment indicate that the global number of people suffering from hunger has continued to decrease in the last few years. A total of 842 million people were estimated to be suffering from chronic hunger in 2011–13, regularly not getting enough food to conduct an active life. This figure is lower than the 868 million estimated last year for 2010–12.

However, large differences in undernourishment persist across countries and regions. Sub-Saharan Africa remains the region with the highest prevalence of undernourishment, while the highest number of undernourished people is in Southern Asia. Progress in hunger reduction has been significant in Eastern Asia and South Eastern Asia as well as in Latin America and the Caribbean, while it was slower in sub-Saharan Africa. Western Asia showed no progress.

2. Why has the global number of hungry come down?

The lower global prevalence of undernourishment reported in *SOFI 2013* reflects higher estimates of food consumption levels in some key countries and regions. Increases in the amounts of basic food such as cereals, oilseeds, meats and dairy products available for human consumption were observed in the recent past in a number of major producer and consumer countries.

3. Which countries have made the biggest progress in hunger reduction?

The most progress was recorded in Asian countries such as Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Mongolia, Thailand and Viet Nam among others. In Latin America, Brazil, Guyana, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and Peru are the main examples of fast progress. Progress was also recorded in African countries such as Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Malawi and Nigeria, which had large reductions in the estimated number of undernourished people.

4. Which countries have made the least progress in hunger reduction?

Very slow progress was recorded in several African countries including Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Tanzania and Zambia, which had increases in the estimated number as well as prevalence of undernourished people in the population. The same was true of Asian countries such as the Democratic Republic of Korea, Yemen, Iraq, Taiwan Province of China, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan among others. In Latin America, Guatemala and Paraguay are examples of slow progress.

5. What are the key requirements for countries to reduce the number of hungry?

One major requirement to tackle hunger is a long-term commitment to mainstreaming food security and nutrition in public policies and programmes. Commitment has to involve the major stakeholders -- in government, the private sector and civil society. Countries where food security and agriculture rank high on the development agenda have generally recorded

significant progress in hunger reduction. A conducive investment climate can support major productivity increases while sustained social protection can help reduce poverty and undernourishment.

6. What has been the impact of high food prices on poor countries?

While food producers have faced higher prices in recent years, increasing the incentive to invest in food production, increased price volatility during this period may have served to discourage greater investments, especially by smallholders facing greater difficulties in doing so. Recent global and national food consumer price indices suggest that changes in consumer prices were generally much more muted than those recorded by international price indices, often influenced by greatly increased speculation in spot, futures and options markets.

The impacts on consumer prices of primary commodity price movements are mediated, complex and variable. Hence, the transmission of producer prices to consumer prices is neither immediate nor automatic. For example, it takes time to ship and process primary products into final food items for consumers. This is true even where supply chains are short, and subsistence production is widespread. Domestic policy interventions to protect consumer prices, market structures and input-output relationships between raw materials and final products are all influential.

For consumers in poor countries facing higher food prices, there can be short- and long-term consequences, mainly negative in nature. Households may sell off assets, take their children out of school, and reduce their food expenditures, shifting to cheaper, less-diverse diets that may provide the dietary energy they need, but lack other essential nutrients and heighten the risk of malnutrition – not captured by the prevalence of undernourishment indicator. This is one reason why *SOFI 2013* has enhanced its consideration of food security by introducing other dimensions, reflected in the new suite of food security indicators.

7. What are the multiple dimensions of food security that *SOFI 2013* is discussing? And why are they relevant?

The prevalence of undernourishment, the main indicator employed by FAO for the global monitoring of food security, is a measure of dietary energy deprivation. As a stand-alone indicator, the prevalence of undernourishment indicator is not able to capture the complexity of food security, as defined by the 2009 Declaration of the World Summit on Food Security: *“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food, which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”*. Based on this definition, four food security dimensions can be identified: food availability, economic and physical access to food, food utilization and stability (vulnerability and shocks) over time. Each food security dimension is described by specific indicators, which include a wide range of factors like the percentage of children stunted, food price volatility, average protein supply, road density, improved water sources and political stability.

It is useful to compare the evolution of different dimensions of food security. For instance, over the last two decades, food availability in developing regions has risen faster than the average dietary energy requirements, and the quality of diets has improved. But ample food availability has not necessarily enabled better food access and utilization for all. When poor access and utilization are widespread despite sufficient food availability, social protection as well as

improvements in food distribution and supplementation programmes can significantly improve food security.

In some countries, the proportion of stunted children, an indicator of food utilization, is considerably higher than the prevalence of undernourishment. In these countries, nutrition-enhancing interventions will be crucial to improve nutritional aspects of food security. Improvements require a range of food security and nutrition-enhancing interventions in agriculture, health, hygiene, water supply and education, particularly targeting women and children.

8. SOFI says hunger and undernutrition can co-exist. What does that mean?

For the purposes of this report, hunger was defined as chronic undernourishment. Chronic undernourishment is described as a state, lasting for at least one year, of inability to acquire enough food, defined as a level of food intake insufficient to meet dietary energy requirements.

Undernutrition is instead defined as the outcome of undernourishment, and/or poor absorption and/or poor biological use of nutrients consumed as a result of repeated infectious disease. Undernutrition includes being *underweight* for one's age, too short for one's age (*stunted*), dangerously thin for one's height (*wasted*) and deficient in vitamins and minerals (micronutrient malnutrition).

The two phenomena often co-exist. Insufficient food intake is often observed where the ability to absorb nutrients and energy from food is poor. But undernutrition may exist even though food intake by the population is estimated to be sufficient. In such cases, nutrition and healthcare interventions should be prioritized.

9. There are only two years left for countries to reach MDG1c and the World Food Summit goal. Why is there optimism that the MDG1c target can still be achieved?

The *SOFI 2013* report is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. Rather, it aims to convey an objective picture of food insecurity in the world.

The 1996 World Food Summit goal, which requires halving the *number* of undernourished people between 1990 and 2015, appears to be out of reach at the global level. To meet the World Food Summit goal, the number of hungry people in developing regions would have to be reduced from the current 842 million to 498 million by 2015. However, many individual countries are on track to meet the target: indeed, 18 countries had already met it by 2012 and received special recognition during the 2013 FAO Conference.

The MDG1c hunger target requires the share or *proportion* of undernourished people in the total population to be reduced by half between 1990 and 2015. The current assessment pegs undernourishment in developing regions at around 24 percent of the population in 1990–92. This means that the MDG hunger target would be met when undernourishment reaches 12 percent of the population in developing countries. Should the average annual decline in hunger since 1990 continue over the next two years, global undernourishment would reach 13 percent. Hence, the target can only be met with sufficient additional efforts to reduce

Large differences exist among regions. The Asia region as a whole is nearly on track to achieve the MDG hunger target in 2015 mainly due to progress in Eastern, South-Eastern and Central Asia as well as the Caucasus, but Southern Asia, Western Asia and sub-Saharan Africa have a long way to go. The MDG target has nearly been reached in Latin America and the Caribbean.

10. Based on *SOFI 2012* figures, FAO recognized countries that had reached the MDG1c hunger target and the WFS goal last June. Are these results confirmed by the 2013 figures?

The results are generally confirmed for the recognized countries. For such countries, the prevalence of undernourishment (PoU) reported for 2011–13 in *SOFI 2013* is generally close to that reported last year for the 2010–12 period.

However, there have been some changes. Estimates for the most recent period (2011–13 in this report) inevitably rely on short-term projections, which are subject to reassessments based on market intelligence and additional information that has become available. Moreover, especially where the PoU is low, as in Uruguay, estimates are highly sensitive to small changes in consumption levels and population growth.

Among the countries recognized in June, the estimated PoU for Uruguay for 2010–12, published in 2012, was “less than 5 percent”. The 2013 estimate shows a slight increase, to 6.2 percent, for the period 2011–13. This change can be explained by lower estimated availability of cereals and vegetable oils, coupled with moderate population growth. The current outlook does not significantly change the position of Uruguay compared with last year, although the country no longer qualifies for the moment.

In the case of Nicaragua, the country would still count among the recognized countries, given the progressive decline of its PoU. However, rapid population growth in recent years means that estimated number of undernourished people in 2011–13 has fallen by 44.5 percent since 1990–92 – in contrast to 49.2 percent between 1990–92 and 2010–12 published in *SOFI 2012*. The current outlook for Nicaragua does not significantly change its position compared with last year, but the country would no longer qualify for meeting the WFS target early.

11. *SOFI* mentions social protection measures to increase the incomes of the poor. What do you mean by that and who should pay for them?

Wider access to food can be promoted through safety nets and similar interventions which have both positive short-term impacts on the poor and long-lasting effects on food availability by stimulating and enabling greater food production. Such programmes may include, among others, cash transfers as well as cash-and-voucher schemes. The initial results of these programmes suggest that they can lead not only to higher consumption, but also to increased investments in agricultural assets, including farm implements and livestock, and more family food production. There is also evidence that such programmes can have multiplier effects through trade and production linkages. Over the longer term, they can generate positive feedback effects as demand created through social protection stimulates smallholder food production, thus helping both poor consumers and producers. These programmes are consistent with the twin-track approach to reducing hunger. They stimulate food demand, which, in turn, provides incentives to increase production and more income-generating opportunities for smallholder production.

Resources for social protection can only be generated by robust and sustainable economic and revenue growth. Investment in agriculture and increased agricultural productivity can contribute to both economic diversification and growth.

In other words, social protection and economic growth are not either-or options. Economic growth helps the poor, but is not always sufficient, or rapid enough. Hence, social protection is

needed to ensure that the most vulnerable are not left behind and can also participate in, benefit from and contribute to growth.

12. Has FAO changed its methodology for computing the prevalence of undernourishment this year compared to *SOFI 2012*?

No. The figures for the 2013 edition of *SOFI* were estimated using the same methodology as in the 2012 edition. However, as countries continued to produce new and better data on food production, trade and consumption, the estimates were updated, as is always done. For this reason, changes in estimates over time may change with each new edition of the *SOFI*.

FAO will also continue to maintain and enrich the suite of indicators presented in this year's report, to better capture different dimensions of food security and nutrition.

13. The main indicator on which *SOFI* is based – the prevalence of undernourishment -- has been criticized for being based on a narrow definition of hunger, covering only chronically inadequate dietary energy. What has been done to respond to this criticism?

The prevalence of undernourishment is designed to capture a clearly and narrowly defined concept of undernourishment, namely a state of dietary energy deprivation lasting at least a year. This report addresses this limitation by also presenting and discussing measures of different dimensions of food security, through a new suite of food security indicators. The suite comprises numerous indicators that reflect elements of a broader concept of food insecurity and hunger.

14. Does the prevalence of undernourishment indicator (PoU) underestimates undernourishment by assuming a minimal level of physical activity, when, in fact, many poor people are engaged in demanding physical activities?

The FAO methodology is based on a probabilistic approach and a representative individual. Ideally, the adequacy of dietary energy intake, and thus the condition of being undernourished, would be assessed at the individual level, by comparing individual energy requirements with individual energy intake. This would allow the prevalence of undernourishment to be estimated by counting the number of people classified as undernourished.

However, such a "head count" approach is not feasible for two reasons. First, individual energy requirements are practically unobservable with standard data collection methods. Second, individual food consumption is influenced by disparities in intra-household food allocation, the variability of individual energy requirements, and the day-to-day variation in food consumption for reasons other than food insecurity (including different workloads or lifestyles, or cultural and religious habits).

As it is practically impossible to implement the head count approach, the FAO developed the PoU estimate for the population as a whole, summarized by the statistical device of a "representative" individual. As body weight, metabolic efficiency and physical activity levels vary in any population, there is a range of values for energy requirements compatible with healthy status. Hence, only values below the minimum of such a range can be associated with undernourishment in a probabilistic sense. Thus, for the PoU to indicate that a randomly selected individual in a population is undernourished, the appropriate threshold must be set at the lower end of the range of normal energy requirements.

15. Would it not make more sense to use household surveys that allow for direct and more accurate measurement of undernourishment, instead of the complex system on which the prevalence of undernourishment is based?

This argument ignores the high costs of surveys capable of properly estimating undernourishment in the vast majority of the countries monitored by FAO. At a minimum, these surveys would need to capture food consumption at the individual level and obtain sufficient information to assess habitual consumption levels. They would also need to secure information on the anthropometric characteristics and activity levels of each surveyed individual, to estimate the relevant individual energy requirement threshold. Such data requirements imply that specific surveys – different from, and much more expensive than, existing household surveys -- would be needed for this purpose. In contrast, the PoU methodology allows integrating information from household surveys with macro data sources, such as food balances, censuses and demographic surveys.

16. Why should we invest in agriculture to reduce undernourishment?

People need incomes to buy food, and the best paying jobs in most developing countries are outside agriculture. Investment in agriculture and increased agricultural productivity can contribute to both economic diversification and growth. As economies develop, many farmers leave the agriculture sector. But such transitions usually take decades, and in the meantime, many poor people remain in farming. These people must become more productive to earn more in order to become better nourished.

17. Why does FAO continue to focus on smallholders? Farmers with a small amount of land will never escape poverty through farming alone, and need other sources of income.

Eventually, many farmers will leave farming and earn most of their income from other sources, but this process is slow, typically taking decades. The usual path for households is to gradually diversify their income sources, to have both farm and non-farm incomes. Thus, smallholders can escape from poverty by increasing their net incomes from farming and by diversifying incomes to rely less on farming. Furthermore, smallholders produce large quantities of food, especially in Africa and Asia. If these smallholders do not produce more food, the world will not be able to meet growing demand for food.

18. Does smallholder agriculture not inhibit the adoption of modern knowledge-intensive technologies needed to produce the increased quantities of food needed in the future?

Many of the most important technologies, such as improved seed varieties, are actually relatively easy for smallholders to adopt. On the other hand, there are some technologies that require large amounts of capital. In many of these cases, rental markets can provide them, enabling smallholders to adopt them. Thus, most new technologies are within the reach of smallholders.

19. Why did FAO select these particular countries for more detailed analysis on progress towards MDG1c?

We want to present a mixed picture -- of progress and setbacks, of successes and shortfalls -- in the fight against hunger. Reducing poverty and hunger requires persistent efforts. The conditions -- environmental, social, economic and political -- that leave people vulnerable vary considerably from one country to another. For example, in Nepal, the ten-year conflict and political uncertainty have affected the effectiveness of institutions and programmes, and hence, agricultural productivity growth. In Tajikistan, the growth of food production per capita has been hampered by incomplete land reform, but also by poor infrastructure.

For Bangladesh, Ghana and Nicaragua, success was spurred by economic growth, but also by the commitment of consecutive governments to long-term rural development and poverty-reducing plans focused on smallholder farmers. Uganda still faces significant challenges. The country has one of the highest population growth rates in the world, as well as low agricultural productivity growth, while a large part of the population lives in poverty.

20. *SOFI* mentions that hunger is likely to be more severe than poverty, especially when both are at elevated levels. What is the relationship between poverty and undernourishment?

The term “hunger” refers to a situation in which people lack access to sufficient food necessary for an active life. The term “poverty” refers to the inability to achieve a socially acceptable minimal standard of living characterized by sufficient consumption of both food and non-food items. Thus, hunger and poverty are different, but related manifestations of deprivation.

Growth tends to benefit those among the poor who can be employed in decent work. The healthy and skilled are more likely to gain such jobs. The hungry may be less able to benefit, as it is very difficult for hungry people to do a full day’s work; hence, they have fewer prospects for earning decent incomes above the poverty line. Hunger can thus be a trap in which people remain poor and hungry as their weakness and exposure to illness inhibit their ability to work. This can be the basis for measures to improve access to food through social protection, which lies at the heart of FAO’s twin-track approach to reducing hunger by stimulating food demand, which, in turn, provides incentives to increase production.

Apart from conceptual issues, there are also measurement difficulties. Hunger, as estimated by FAO, refers to the chronic lack of sufficient dietary energy intake necessary for an active life. It has become commonplace to define poverty in relation to income, defined by the World Bank as \$1.25 per person per day in 2005.

21. What is the relationship between hunger and undernutrition?

In many of our case studies, we find that although there has been significant progress in fighting undernourishment, there have been no improvements in nutritional outcomes, as measured, for instance by the proportion of children who are stunted or underweight. This means that, although people may have stable access to sufficient food for their energy needs, this food is not always of sufficient quality to provide all the necessary vitamins and nutrients, or that some people are too ill to utilize the nutrients they consume.

There are many reasons why undernutrition may occur. Lack of dietary diversity can result in undernutrition, especially where diets are poor in micronutrient-rich foods such as meat, fish, and dairy products. Poor access to safe water and sanitation – both crucial for mitigating the risk of disease – can inhibit efficient food utilization. Poor education and lack of access to ante-natal and child-care facilities are also important.

In many situations, nutrition supplements will be needed to improve the nutritional status of the population in the short term. A range of food security and other nutrition-enhancing interventions in agriculture, health, hygiene, water supply and education, particularly targeting women, are necessary in the medium and long term.

For example, although hunger is prevalent in Uganda, since 1997, government expenditure on health care has increased so that many more people, especially the poorest, are using government health centres. Better healthcare and child-care practices, together with reductions in poverty, have contributed towards improving nutrition in recent years.

In the case of Ghana, which has already achieved the 2015 MDG hunger target with less than 5 percent of its population undernourished, further progress is needed to address the nutritional situation of young children. A high disease burden and lack of access to de-worming medication, lack of adequate child-feeding practices at key stages of their development, as well as poor sanitation facilities, which result in waterborne chronic diseases, have contributed to this.

22. What have we learned from the country case studies on the key requirements for reducing the number of hungry?

Most importantly, long-term commitment to integrating food security and nutrition in policies and programmes are key to reducing the number of hungry and malnourished people. If we are to achieve major reductions in poverty and undernourishment, food security and agriculture must be kept high on the agenda through comprehensive reforms and improvements in investment. But as employment and income growth is likely to be slow in the medium term, enhanced social protection will be necessary to overcome hunger, poverty and undernutrition.

For example, in Bangladesh the development and implementation of its 2008 National Food Policy has led to food security and nutrition being mainstreamed in its policies, with the involvement of a large number of its ministries, as well as civil society and the private sector. In Ghana, sustained political commitment and partnership with the donor community has led to the success of its policies and reforms.

Indeed, robust economic growth can be effective in reducing hunger only if it is broadly shared so that policies ensure that smallholders and rural folk can benefit from increased food production, jobs and incomes. In the light of slow progress in reducing undernutrition, nutrition supplements are needed in the short-term. The development of nutrition-enhancing social protection is of paramount importance in ensuring interventions reach the most nutritionally vulnerable groups which include pregnant women, adolescent girls and children. But medium and long term improvements in nutrition require a range of nutrition-enhancing interventions in agriculture, health, education, particularly for women, hygiene and water supply.