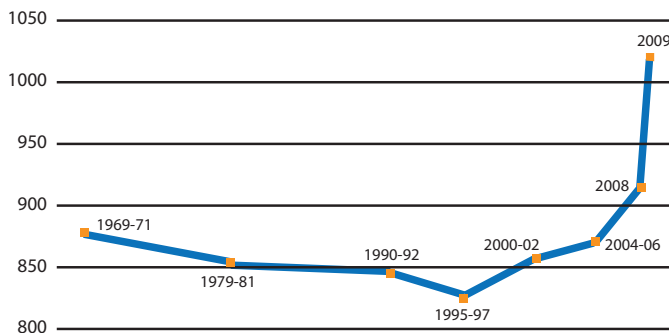


Hunger in the Face of Crisis

Global Economic Slowdown Underscores Urgency of Addressing Long-Term Challenges

More than one billion people are undernourished worldwide. FAO estimates show a significant deterioration of an already disappointing trend witnessed over the past ten years. The large increase in the number of undernourished people in 2009 underlies the urgency of tackling the root causes of hunger swiftly and effectively (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of Hungry People in the World (in Millions)

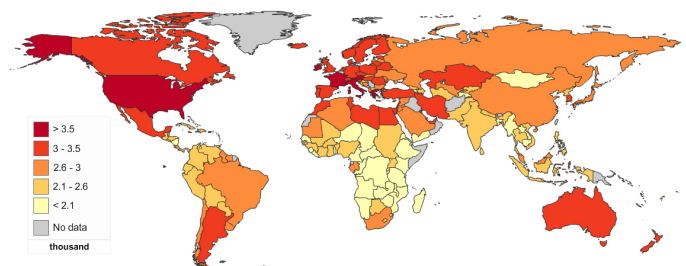


Source: FAO (value for 2009 is a projection).

- The number of hungry in the world now exceeds one billion persons
- While the global economic slowdown lies at the core of the recent increase, hunger remains a major longer-term challenge
- Fundamental changes are needed, including improved governance at national and international level

However, food supplies are very unevenly distributed across the globe. While wealthy countries produce large surpluses, many developing countries do not have enough food to guarantee their citizens a level of consumption required for a healthy life (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Availability of Food in the World (in kcal per person per day)



Source: FAO (darker shading indicates higher daily calorie consumption)

The global economic crisis at the core

The current global economic slowdown—following soaring food prices in 2006-2008—lies at the core of the sharp increase in world hunger. It has reduced incomes and employment opportunities of the poor and significantly lowered their access to food.

With lower incomes, the poor are less able to acquire food, especially as prices are still high by historical standards. While international food prices have retreated from their mid-2008 peak levels, prices on local markets have not fallen to the same extent in many developing countries. In June 2009, domestic staple foods cost on average 22 percent more in real terms than two years earlier; a finding that was true across a range of important foodstuffs.

The latest hunger figures are particularly unsettling as undernourishment is not a result of limited international food supplies. Recent figures of the FAO Food Outlook indicate a strong world cereal production in 2009, which will only modestly fall short of last year's record output level. Clearly, the world can produce enough food to eliminate hunger.

Another issue concerns the use of food. In fact, only one fourth of the world's cereal production is currently used directly for human consumption. Agricultural production increasingly goes into animal feed in order to satisfy growing meat consumption, especially in emerging economies. Or it serves non-food uses, such as the production of biofuels to help quench the world's steadily growing energy needs.

Impacts of hunger

Undernourishment affects large segments of the population in developing countries. It particularly hurts the rural landless and urban poor as they cannot rely on self subsistence farming. Female headed households constitute another vulnerable group as women are frequently prevented from engaging in paid employment and thus do not have the means to access adequate food.

Apart from humanitarian concerns, hunger threatens development more generally. Faced with food insecurity, households try to maintain income by migrating, selling

assets such as livestock, borrowing money, or participating in new types of economic activity, including child labour. Furthermore, people tend to shift expenditures towards cheaper, calorie-rich, energy-dense foods such as grains, and away from more expensive protein- and nutrient-rich foods such as meat, dairy products, or fruits and vegetables; a situation that is particularly harmful for children and pregnant or lactating women.

Coping mechanisms thus involve undesirable but often unavoidable compromises: withdrawing children from schools destroys long-term human capital; the sale of assets reduces the stock of physical or financial resources and is not easily reversible; and shifting from more nutritious foods towards less nutritious items or simply eating less deteriorates people's health, lowers labour productivity and reduces children's cognitive potential.

What policy options are available?

The drastic increase in the number of hungry—and even more the fact that this number has remained above 800 million for the past 40 years—reveals the fragility of the present food system. In order to fight hunger a twin track approach remains key, involving both measures for immediate relief and more fundamental structural changes.

In the short term, safety nets and social protection programmes must be improved to reach those most in need. Simultaneously, small-scale farmers must be given access to indispensable tools and technologies that will allow them to boost production. These include high-quality seeds, fertilizers, and adequate farming equipments. Higher local production will be instrumental to lower food prices for poor consumers, both rural and urban.

In the medium and long term, the structural solution to hunger lies in increasing agricultural output in countries prone to food shortages. Stable and effective policies, regulatory and institutional mechanisms, and functional market infrastructures that promote investment in the agricultural sector are paramount.

More fundamental changes needed

However, a “business-as-usual” approach will not reduce hunger to the extent necessary. In order to achieve sustainable results, governance needs to improve at national and international levels.

In food insecure countries, institutions are needed based on the principles of the Right to Adequate Food. These should promote transparency and accountability, the empowerment of the poor and their participation in the decisions that affect them. The Voluntary Guidelines for the Implementation of the Right to Food at national level are an important step in this direction.

At the international level, improved governance includes a reformed Committee on World Food Security, which needs to become the cornerstone of international cooperation in the area of food security. The Committee should act as the leading political body to fight hunger, ensuring that all relevant stakeholders are heard in the policy debates, and that decisions are based on hard scientific evidence.

Keeping agriculture on the agenda

Soaring food prices propelled food security and agriculture back on the policy agenda. With food commodity prices in world markets gradually falling, and in the face of the global financial and economic crisis, the focus risks shifting away from the plight of poorer countries struggling to feed their populations. While dealing with the global recession, the international community must not forget its commitments to the one billion people suffering from hunger.

Economic crises have typically led to declines in public investment in agriculture, with devastating impacts on poverty and hunger. Past experiences and empirical studies tell us that particularly at this time, support to agriculture should not be reduced; indeed, it must be increased. Only a healthy agricultural and agro-industrial sector, combined with an overall growing economy and effective safety nets, will effectively reduce and eventually eliminate hunger.

Further information

- FAO. 2009. The State of Food Insecurity in the World. <http://www.fao.org/publications/sofi>
- FAO. 2009. The World Food Situation (online portal). <http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation>

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