



2006

The State of Food Insecurity in the World

Eradicating world hunger – taking stock ten years after the World Food Summit

In November 1996, heads of State and Government of more than 180 nations attending the World Food Summit (WFS) pledged to eradicate hunger. As an important step towards this noble and long overdue objective, world leaders committed themselves to what was considered an ambitious but attainable intermediate target: to halve by 2015 the **number** of undernourished people in the world from the 1990 level.

Ten years later, the number of undernourished people in the world remains stubbornly high. In 2001–03, FAO estimates there were still 854 million undernourished people worldwide: 820 million in the developing countries, 25 million in the transition countries and 9 million in the industrialized countries. In spite of advances in some countries, virtually no progress has been made towards the

WFS target at the global level. Since 1990–92, the baseline period for the WFS target, the undernourished population in the developing countries has declined by only 3 million people: from 823 million to 820 million.

Because of population growth, the very small decrease in the number of hungry people has nevertheless resulted in a reduction in the **proportion** of undernourished people in the developing countries by 3 percentage points – from 20 percent in 1990–92 to 17 percent in 2001–03. This means that progress has been made towards the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG 1) of halving the percentage of undernourished people by 2015.

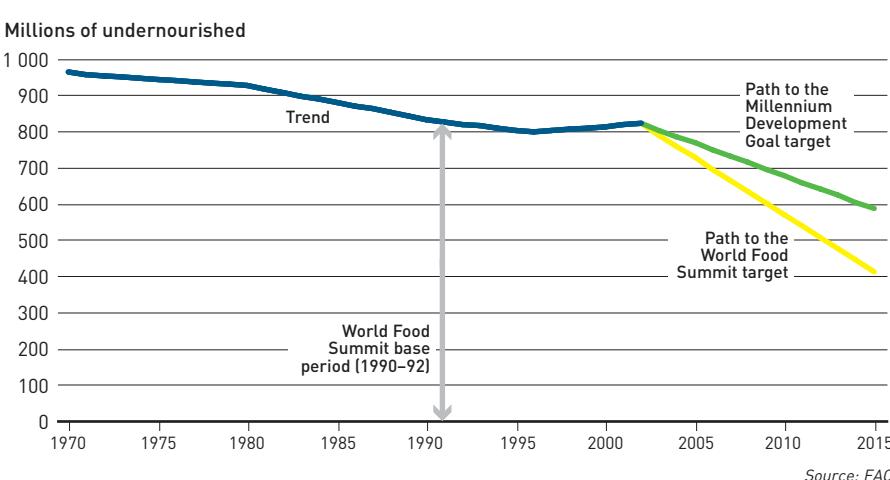
Success in meeting the WFS target will require a sharp acceleration in the rate of reduction of the proportion of undernourished. Indeed, even if the MDG

From the Director-General's Foreword

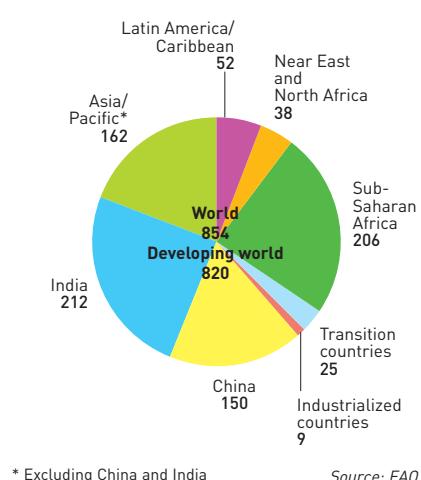
Is the 2015 WFS target still attainable? The answer should be a resounding “Yes”, as long as concrete and concerted action, following the WFS Plan of Action, is taken and stepped up immediately. Today, we are confident that the race against hunger can still be won, but only if the necessary resources, political will and correct policies are forthcoming. We fully agree with the principal conclusion of the United Nations Millennium Project’s Hunger Task Force: **It can be done.**

target were to be reached by 2015, the WFS target would still be far from being met. In order to attain the WFS target in the developing countries, the number of undernourished people must be reduced by 31 million per year between 2001–03 and 2015.

Number of undernourished people in the developing world



Undernourished 2001–03 (millions)



Undernourishment around the world

Regional trends in undernourishment

Global stagnation in hunger reduction masks significant disparities among regions: **Asia and the Pacific** and **Latin America and the Caribbean** have seen an overall reduction in both the number and prevalence of undernourished people since the WFS baseline period. Nevertheless, in both regions the average rate of reduction has fallen short of what would be required to reach the WFS target by 2015. Furthermore, in the case of Asia and the Pacific the number of undernourished has reverted to an increasing trend over the latter part of

the decade, although the prevalence has continued to decline. Underlying this reversal are larger absolute numbers in China and India in 2001–03 relative to 1995–97.

On the other hand, both in the **Near East and North Africa** and in **sub-Saharan Africa** the number of undernourished people has risen during the 11-year period following the WFS baseline. In sub-Saharan Africa, this represents the continuation of a trend that has been apparent over at least the last three decades. However, in this region, recent progress in reducing the prevalence of hunger is noteworthy. For the first time in several decades, the

share of undernourished people in the region's population saw a significant decline: from 35 percent in 1990–92 to 32 percent in 2001–03, after having reached 36 percent in 1995–97. This is an encouraging development, but the task facing the region remains daunting: the number of undernourished people increased from 169 million to 206 million while reaching the WFS target will require a reduction to 85 million by 2015.

The Near East and North Africa is the only region in which both the number and proportion of undernourished have risen since 1990–92, albeit from a relatively low base. Following the significant reduction in the numbers of undernourished achieved during the 1970s, the trend in subsequent decades has been consistently upwards. The decade since the WFS baseline period constituted no exception, although the rate of increase slowed in the later years.

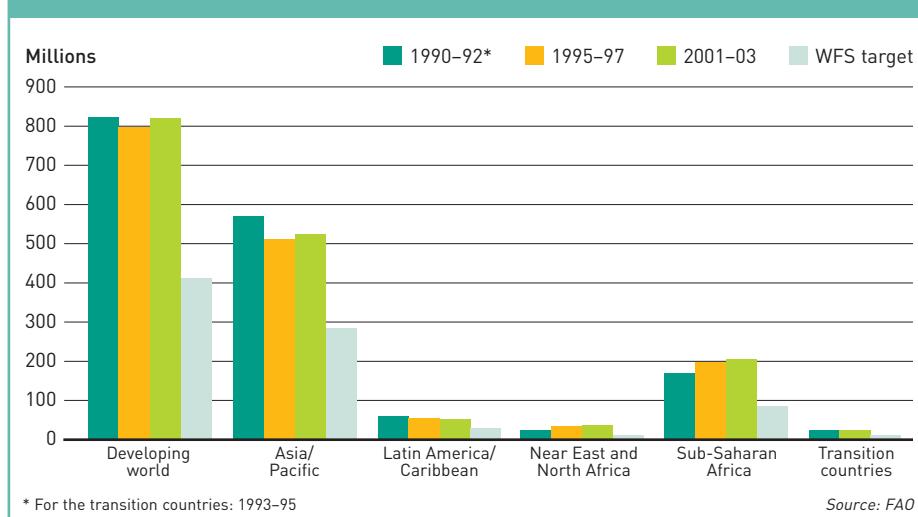
For the **transition countries**, the number of undernourished people has increased slightly, from 23 million to 25 million. This rise is attributed mainly to higher numbers in the Commonwealth of Independent States, where the majority of the region's undernourished people are found.

Undernourishment in the lead-up to 2015

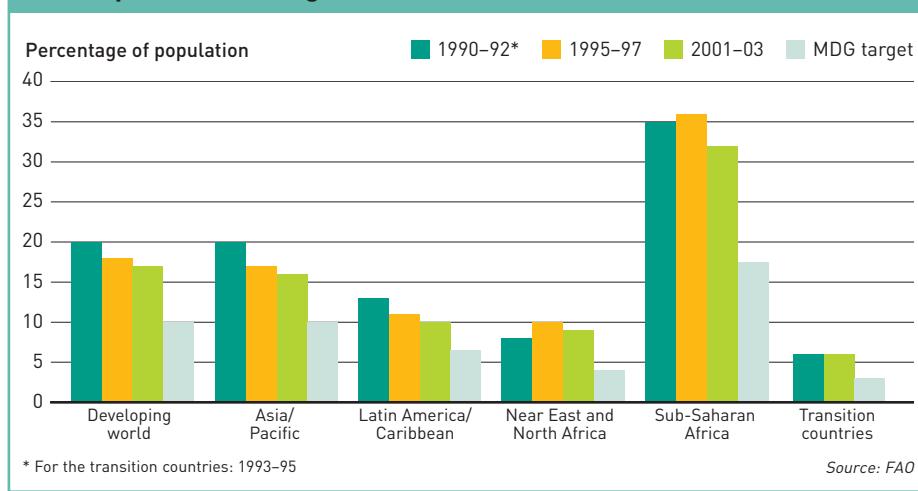
Despite painfully slow global progress in hunger reduction over the last decade, a positive sign comes from some of FAO's latest projections, which indicate an acceleration in the future. The prevalence of hunger in the developing countries as a group is projected to drop by exactly half from the base rate (in 1990–92) of 20.3 percent to 10.1 percent in 2015. If this happens, the MDG hunger reduction target will be met. The same cannot be said for the WFS commitment, as the number of undernourished people in 2015 is expected to remain in excess of its target by 170 million hungry people.

A reduced number of undernourished people is not envisaged for all developing regions. Only East Asia is expected to reach the WFS target. Sub-Saharan Africa and the Near East and North Africa, on the contrary, are expected to suffer an increase, reaching higher

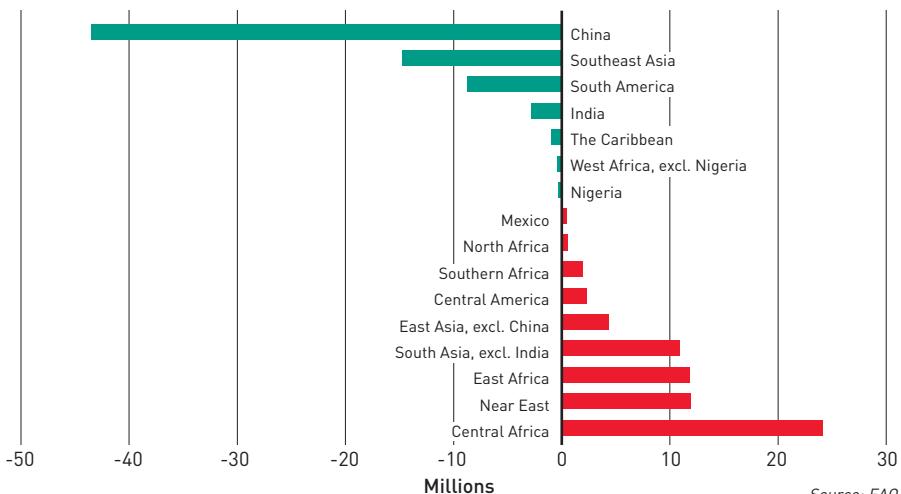
Number of undernourished and the World Food Summit target



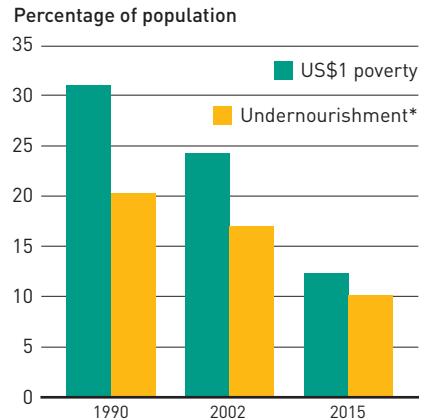
Proportion of undernourished people and the Millennium Development Goal target



Changes in number of undernourished in subregions from 1990–92 to 2001–03



Poverty and undernourishment



numbers in 2015 than in 1990–92. Latin America and the Caribbean and South Asia, while projected to reach the MDG target, are not on track for the WFS target. The recent increasing trends in the number of undernourished people in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and the Near East and North Africa are likely to be reversed, but, of these three, only South Asia is foreseen to reach the MDG target.

Reducing hunger will be particularly difficult for countries characterized by historically very high levels of hunger prevalence, very low food consumption (under 2 200 kcal/person/day in 1999–2001), low economic growth prospects, high population growth rates and a limited agricultural resource base. Thirty-two countries fall into this category – with undernourishment rates ranging

from 29 to 72 percent of the population and an average prevalence of 42 percent. Their current population of 580 million is projected to rise to 1.39 billion by 2050. Despite their poor historical record, however, several of these countries could achieve significant gains by prioritizing the development of local food production, as other countries have done in the past.

Undernourishment and poverty

Growth in per capita incomes will contribute to hunger alleviation by reducing poverty and increasing per capita food demand. Higher growth rates in per capita GDP relative to the 1990s are projected for most regions and country groups. Trends and projections for poverty and undernourishment rates significantly indicate that the poverty

target of MDG 1 (halving the proportion of the poor by 2015) will be reached in the baseline scenario.

Different methodologies are used to estimate poverty and undernourishment and the figures are not directly comparable. However, a closer look at trends for both indicators in the developing countries reveals that poverty has tended to decline more rapidly than undernourishment. The World Bank and FAO projections for these indicators suggest that this trend will continue.

This suggests that poverty reduction does not benefit proportionately those among the poor who are also undernourished. Although the reasons for the slower rate of hunger reduction are not clear, an important factor may be that hunger itself acts as a barrier to escaping poverty (the hunger trap). Hunger is not only a consequence but also a cause of poverty, and it compromises the productive potential of individuals, families and entire nations.

An important policy implication of this relationship would be that, in the absence of purposeful action, hunger will compromise efforts to reduce poverty globally. Income growth, while necessary, is not always sufficient for eradicating hunger. Specific measures targeted directly at ensuring access to food are an indispensable component of effective hunger eradication efforts.

Projected undernourishment in the developing world

	Number of undernourished people (millions)			Prevalence of undernourishment (percentage of population)		
	1990–92	2015	WFS target	1990–92	2015	MDG target
Developing countries	823	582	412	20.3	10.1	10.2
Sub-Saharan Africa	170	179	85	35.7	21.1	17.9
Near East and North Africa	24	36	12	7.6	7.0	3.8
Latin America and the Caribbean	60	41	30	13.4	6.6	6.7
South Asia	291	203	146	25.9	12.1	13.0
East Asia*	277	123	139	16.5	5.8	8.3

* Includes Southeast Asia.

Source: FAO

Towards the Summit commitments

Lessons learnt in hunger reduction

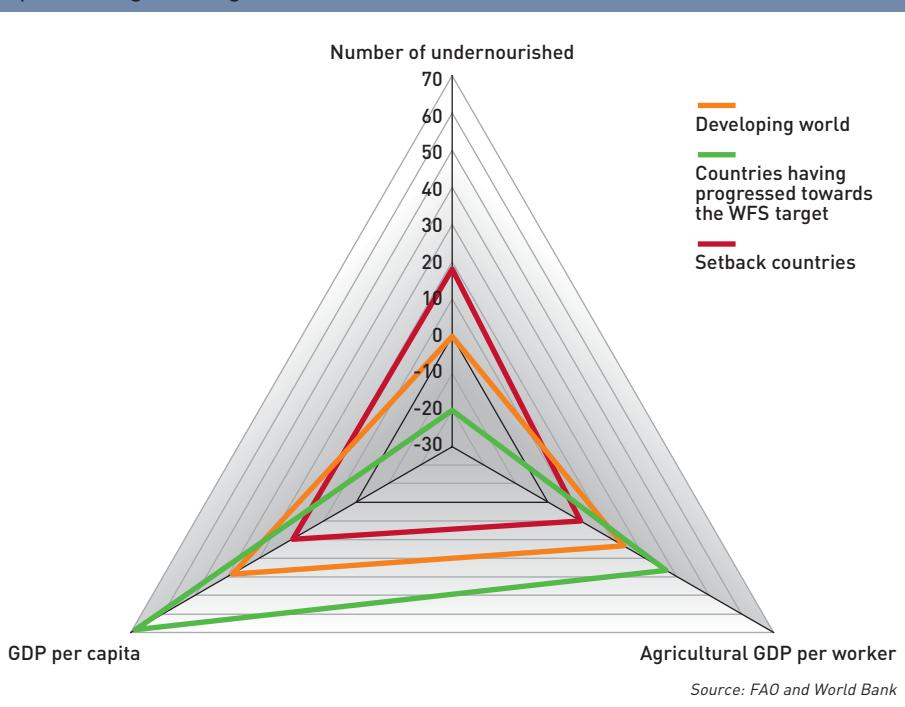
In stepping up our efforts to reach the WFS target and broadening the areas of progress, past experiences can provide indispensable guidance on general policy directions. The following are some of the policy lessons emerging from past successes and failures in hunger reduction.

- Hunger reduction is necessary for accelerating development and poverty reduction.
- Agricultural growth is critical for hunger reduction.
- Technology can contribute, but under the right conditions.
- Public investment is essential for agricultural growth.
- Development assistance does not target the neediest countries.
- Peace and stability are a *sine qua non* for hunger and poverty reduction.

Twin track – a tried and effective approach

The concentration of hunger in rural areas suggests that no sustained reduction in hunger is possible without special emphasis on agricultural and rural development. Those countries that have managed to reduce hunger have not only experienced more rapid overall economic growth but have also achieved greater gains in agricultural productivity than those experiencing setbacks or stagnation. It follows that investments in agriculture, and more broadly in the rural economy, are often a prerequisite for accelerated hunger reduction. The agriculture sector tends to be the engine of growth for entire rural economies, and productivity-driven increases in agricultural output can expand food supplies and reduce food prices in local

Undernourishment, GDP per capita and agricultural GDP per worker (percentage change 1990–92 to 2001–03)



markets, raise farm incomes and boost the overall local economy by generating demand for locally produced goods and services.

By now, it is well understood that hunger compromises the health and productivity of individuals and their efforts to escape poverty. Accelerating hunger reduction consequently requires direct measures to help people who are both poor and ill-fed to escape the hunger-poverty trap. Empirical evidence from an increasing number of countries illustrates the powerful contribution that direct and carefully targeted measures can make to both hunger and poverty reduction.

A twin-track approach, emphasizing direct action against hunger along with a focus on agricultural and rural

development, is effective in providing the most vulnerable and food-insecure people with new livelihood possibilities and hope for a better quality of life. Efforts to promote the twin-track approach as the principal strategic framework for hunger reduction should therefore be at the centre of poverty reduction initiatives at all levels.

In a world that has the means for feeding its population, the persistence of hunger is a scandal. We have learnt from experiences. We know what needs to be done to accelerate progress towards a world free of hunger. There are more than 850 million people waiting for action. We must step up dramatically our efforts to reach the WFS hunger reduction target. If the political will is there, we can reach it.

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