

Report shows widespread undernourishment in Africa

Barry Mason
6 September 2004

Economic immigrants from Africa are routinely portrayed in the European press as scroungers as politicians compete in devising the best methods to keep them out. The real conditions that drive thousands of people each year to attempt to migrate out of Africa to the West, often risking their lives and paying huge sums to traffickers, are revealed in a recent report by the Washington-based International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). The media has virtually ignored the report.

About 200 million people in Africa are undernourished, according to the report. Asia has more undernourished people in absolute number terms, but the rate in Africa is highest. An estimated 14 percent of the world's population is undernourished, but in continental Africa the figure is 27.4 percent and in sub-Saharan Africa it is around 33 percent. In 12 African countries the rate exceeds 40 percent and in countries with conflicts or emerging from conflict the rate exceeds 50 percent.

In Africa undernourishment has increased by 20 percent since the early 90s and is double the rate in the late 1960s. Undernutrition was the major factor in around 30 percent of deaths each year, a figure of 2.9 million.

The IFPRI researches food policy in the developing world and is financed by the World Bank, the United Nations Children's organisation UNICEF, the European Union, the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation FAO amongst others.

Undernourishment is measured by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), combining an estimate of total food calories available in a country with how these calories are distributed across the population. It measures the number of people who are not obtaining an adequate daily energy supply of food.

The IFPRI has produced figures which show that in a third of African countries the mean daily per capita calorific intake is below the recommended level of 2,100. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Eritrea and Somalia that average figure is below the absolute minimum calorific intake to maintain body weight of 1,800.

A vicious circle of malnourishment is created: "A girl born to a mother that is undernourished will be likely to be born stunted in height and weight.... If the infant survives, her growth will be

more likely to falter.... She will be susceptible to infectious diseases.... During her child-bearing years; she will bear low birth-weight babies of her own. And so the cycle of intergenerational poverty and ill-health continues."

For many Africans there is no food security, i.e., no guaranteed access to food. Even if there is food production taking place, there is insufficient income for urban dwellers and a lack of resources in rural African households leaving them unable to access sufficient food. Food security is further threatened in areas with a single rainy season. Whilst following the harvest a family might have sufficient food, there is often insufficient to provide a secure supply right through to the next harvest.

The report explains how HIV/AIDS impacts on this dire situation. Adults with HIV infection have a 10-30 percent increased energy requirement, but their condition leaves them less able to secure food. "HIV poses a double nutritional burden: as the infection progresses the infected individual is unable to produce or earn income to reliably get access to the food required, whilst at the same time his or her nutritional requirements have increased."

Africa bucked the global trend of a decline in child malnutrition between 1980 and 2000. In Africa the decline in the rate of stunted growth was less than four percent and, because of population growth, the actual number of stunted (low height-for-age) children went up by more than 12 million. The relative and absolute numbers of underweight (low weight-for-age) children also increased. The report states: "Large populations coupled with high levels of malnutrition mean that 19 percent of the almost 47 million stunted preschoolers in Africa are found in Nigeria, while eight percent are found in DR Congo."

Dependence on a limited range of staple foods leads to health problems because of the lack of certain micronutrients in such food. In Africa the four most deficient micronutrients are Vitamin A, iron, zinc and iodine. The report states: "Between 15,000 and 20,000 African women die each year owing to severe iron-deficiency anaemia ... hundreds of thousands of children ... have lowered intellectual capacity due to iodine deficiency. Vitamin A deficiencies in children are common across the continent, reducing their ability to resist infection

and contributing to the deaths of more than half a million African children annually.”

Staples consisting of grains, roots and tubers make up about 65 percent of the food available to most Africans. These staples are deficient in the micronutrients listed above. The report notes: “The continued reliance on staple grains, roots, and tubers for the bulk of calories is principally an economic issue. Meat and fish consumption for the many poor Africans is a luxury.... Unless dynamic, poverty-reducing growth is achieved in the short term, one should expect that the shares of total calories available across food types will remain [at the same level].”

The total of 200 million undernourished people in Africa is made up of 160 million facing chronic undernutrition, together with food emergencies that require international intervention. The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that in 2003, 38 million Africans were affected by emergencies. These crises result from drought, flood and civil conflict and the resultant refugees. Food emergencies as a result of civil conflict occurred in Angola, DR Congo and Sierra Leone last year amongst other countries. Eritrea and Ethiopia were affected by drought, leading to food emergencies.

While the countries within Africa affected by such emergencies may change there is a regular occurrence of such emergencies each year. The danger that the chronic undernutrition can explode into a full emergency is always present: “Undernutrition in its various forms in Africa is primarily a chronic condition. The food crises emerge when broad negative shocks—whether due to drought, floods or other natural disasters; economic downturns; or conflict, and often in combination or in sequence—affect chronically food-insecure populations. Those suffering in these acute food insecurity incidents were food insecure or vulnerable to begin with.... Although they may not necessarily face an acute crisis in access to food, their access is not secure. They are vulnerable. Indeed, if any of the 160 million were to be affected by one of these broad shocks or a range of other more individual shocks—death in the household, loss of an income, and so on—most would soon face an acute hunger crisis.”

Sub-Saharan Africa child mortality rates are 170 per 1000 live births. In some countries a decline in child mortality has now been reversed. Malnutrition exacerbates child mortality rates in over 50 percent of cases. The impact of HIV infection also dramatically reduces the access to food and healthcare.

As a result of HIV infection the chances of people being born today reaching their 55th birthday is less than 50 percent. Those areas with the highest HIV infection have the highest drop in life expectancy. This has a knock-on effect on nutrition.

The report states that because of HIV/AIDS, “high levels of mortality among parents of young children render these children nutritionally insecure. In addition to the economic shock resulting from the death of a parent and resulting impact on the access a child has to sufficient food of adequate quality,

the death will also reduce the quality of care the child receives.... the nutrition security of an orphaned child will be reduced due both to an absolute reduction in the nutritional resources—food, health services, and so on ... and to less effective use of the resources that are available”.

Summing up the situation the report states: “a large proportion of the population of Africa does not enjoy food security. Moreover, many of those who have good access to sufficient food for their calorific needs nonetheless suffer from nutrition insecurity. Many households consume a monotonous, unvaried diet and so suffer from micronutrient deficiencies.”

The report then turns to what must be done. It says economic growth is necessary to reduce malnutrition. Noting that two thirds of Africans live in rural areas, it emphasises the need for farmers to have access to better crop varieties, livestock, fertilisers and modern techniques. Citing studies that have been carried out, it explains, “To end hunger in sub-Saharan Africa ... a regional annual average per capita growth rate of 6.3 percent is needed to meet a target date of 2025 and 3.5 percent if the target date is 2050. In the past decade, however, only half a dozen countries have had average per capita growth rates above 2.5 percent. The challenge is immense.”

The report details a disastrous situation in Africa, but the only answer it offers is more of the same free market measures that have produced the food shortages in the first place.

“African nations and farmers,” the report claims, “can be strong participants in such open markets. Consequently they must remain fully engaged in negotiations within the World Trade Organisation (WTO) ... African smallholders are in a disadvantageous position relative to the large, integrated agribusinesses that dominate global trade. Likely modifications to current forms of agricultural production will be needed if Africa is to compete effectively in broad global markets. Not competing, however, is not an option.”

Privatisation of utilities like water and power supplies, cuts in health care, cuts in subsidies to poor farmers, increased fees for health and education are all part of the package that has been forced on the population of Africa under the terms of World Bank and IMF structural adjustment programmes. Making Africa compete in the global market will only mean further opening up its agriculture to foreign companies, who will produce crops for export while the majority of the population continue to live in near starvation conditions.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact