

Hunger and malnutrition increase in many parts of the world

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Amongst the primary Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) proclaimed at the turn of the new century by the United Nations were the eradication of extreme poverty and a halving of the numbers suffering hunger across the globe by 2015.

The target on eliminating the scourge of hunger is especially important, as without it many of the UN's other goals, such as reducing the child mortality rate, combating key diseases and improving maternal health cannot hope to be addressed.

A report card on nutrition published in May by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) shows that the target on hunger will not be met.

The "Progress for Children" report explains, "Despite an overall improvement between 1990 and 2004, the present rate of decline in the proportion of underweight children in the developing world is not sufficient to reach the MDG target of reducing hunger by half between 1990 and 2015."

It reveals that 5.6 million children die each year as a result of malnutrition and 146 million children are underweight, many to a life-threatening degree. This figure represents 27 percent of children in developing countries.

The report gives a regional breakdown of the figures. It describes the Eastern/Southern Africa region to be at an "impasse," explaining, "Of the 17 countries in this region ... only Botswana is on track to reach the target (MDG), and 9 countries are either showing no change or getting worse."

It continued, "In Ethiopia, almost half of children are underweight, and along with Nigeria (from the West/Central Africa region) it accounts for more than a third of all underweight children in sub-Saharan Africa."

This region has suffered conflict and drought

exacerbated by high levels of HIV/Aids, which has led to a decline in agricultural productivity and recurring food crises. Even South Africa, the richest country in the region, is not exempt. "South Africa has been going backwards, with its proportion of underweight children rising by an average of 5.6 percent a year since 1994-1995," the report states.

The West/Central Africa region has the highest mortality rate for children aged five and under in the world. Whilst some progress has been made in reducing the number of underweight children, the MDG will not be met. Niger and Burkina Faso have the highest rates of underweight children in the region.

In the Middle East/North Africa region progress in meeting the MDG has been reversed. This is mainly due to the plight of children in three countries—Sudan, Iraq and Yemen. The report states, "Forty-six percent of all children in Yemen are underweight, and since 1990, the situation has gotten worse ... An estimated 53 percent of Yemeni under-fives are now stunted ... Sudan, 41 percent of children are underweight ... The nutritional status of Sudanese children, particularly in the south has been adversely affected by civil war."

The figures on Iraq are especially damning. They are an indictment of the UN itself, which was responsible for imposing years of sanctions on the country prior to the US-British invasion of 2003.

The latest data available on Iraq is from 2000—almost a decade after the first Gulf war and the imposition of UN sanctions. The report shows that at this time the proportion of underweight children and the mortality rate for children aged five and under had grown considerably from 1990. The current situation under conditions of war and occupation is very likely even worse.

On the Latin America/Caribbean region the report

notes, “While the headline numbers and annual progress rates... are encouraging, the region has a legacy of inequality and social disparity.”

In 2002, the UNICEF rapid nutritional assessment “revealed that national averages tend to hide the extreme disparities that leave children vulnerable to under nutrition ... Children living in rural areas are well over twice as likely to be underweight (13 percent) as children living in urban areas (5 percent).”

Whilst not on the same scale as in the “developing world,” the increase in social inequality in the industrialised countries is also having an impact on the UN achieving its goals. It notes, “In Australia, low birth weight is more common in babies born to families of low socio-economic status... In the United States, low birth weight is increasing among all groups, but the highest levels are found among ethnic minorities.”

The figures in the report show that nearly three-quarters of the number of underweight children is accounted for by just ten countries—India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, China, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Philippines and Vietnam. More than half the total is accounted for by three countries—India, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

India is currently being paraded as an example of how capitalist development can enable a secure future for some of the world’s poorest people. But an article in the *New Statesman* in January this year by South Asia correspondent William Dalrymple illustrated how the “boom” in India’s economy is fragile and uneven.

Dalrymple wrote that on leaving Gurgaon, a town on the edge of Delhi that is home to many of the new software and call centre companies, “it is like heading back in time.”

He continued: “The truth is that much of India remains completely untouched by this astonishing boom ... the grandchildren of the two-thirds of Indians who derive their income from agriculture remain, by and large, farmers.”

The figures of malnourished children in India revealed by UNICEF show the real extent of this unevenness. Of the world’s estimated 146 million under-fives who are underweight, 57 million are found in India alone.

The report concludes plaintively: “The world is certainly capable of getting on track to meet the MDGs on child nutrition and health. There can be no excuses

if another generation of children is allowed to fall by the wayside.”

But whilst the resources and technology certainly exist in abundance to eradicate poverty and hunger, the anarchic system of private ownership of the means of production and competing nation states and the unrestrained drive of a parasitic elite to enrich itself mean that the basic needs of an ever-increasing number of the world’s population cannot be met.

This reality is spelt out another report recently published by the UNEP/GRID-Arendal, a United Nations Environment Programme centre based in Norway, produced in collaboration with *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

“Planet in Peril—An Atlas of Current Threats to People and the Environment” has a chapter bluntly entitled, “Losing the Battle Against Hunger.” It explains, “In 2000 there were 852 million undernourished people on Earth. Over the last five years their number has increased every year by about 4 million. Without a radical change of course we will not achieve the United Nations Millennium Development Goal.”

The chapter sets out that the growth of hunger is not simply the result of natural catastrophes or wars, but of policy decisions by the major economic powers and their banks and financial institutions.

“In economic terms the free market policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank ... are responsible for a large part of the increase in food insecurity,” it states.

One of the conditions of “the brutal deregulation of the economy in developing countries,” spearheaded by the IMF and World Bank’s structural adjustment policies, has been demands for an “end to subsidies on essential foodstuffs,” the report notes.



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