

Nearly 1 billion of world's people face chronic hunger

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13 December 2008

The number of undernourished people in the world has increased from 923 million in 2007 to 963 million in 2008. This disturbing figure comes from a report on world hunger released on December 9 by the Rome-based UN Agency, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), entitled *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2008*.

The report notes that the number of chronically hungry people rose by 75 million in 2007, while the 2008 figure shows an increase of 40 million. The recent increase in the number of hungry people has been exacerbated by high food prices, especially in developing countries.

In a news release on the FAO web site, FAO Assistant Director-General Hafez Ghanem underscored the difficulties being faced by people in the developing world:

"For millions of people in developing countries, eating the minimum amount of food every day to live an active and healthy life is a distant dream. The structural problems of hunger, like the lack of access to land, credit and employment, combined with high food prices remain a dire reality."

The report is the ninth in a series that began in 1996 at the World Food Summit (WFS), which set up the goal of halving world hunger by 2015. While the WFS called for the number of hungry people to decline by 50 percent, the UN's Millennium Development Goal (MDG) has set a target to cut in half the proportion of those suffering malnutrition.

Given the upsurge in food prices and other problems, it will continue to be difficult to achieve either goal by 2015. With the increase to 963 million hungry people, it would be necessary to reduce the number of hungry people by about 480 million. And, while the proportion

of undernourished people (the MDG measurement) had been decreasing, from 20 percent in 1990-92 to 16 percent in 2003-05, it appears that this progress is being reversed, moving back up to about 17 percent.

The distribution of undernourished people in the world is largely concentrated in the developing world, although there were 16 million undernourished persons in developed countries in 2003-2005. Among the 832 million chronically hungry persons in 2003-2005, 65 percent were concentrated in India, China, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Ethiopia.

In sub-Saharan Africa, while the proportion of people who are chronically hungry was reduced between the early 1990s and 2003-2005, one in three persons still remains undernourished. However, most of the numerical increase in the undernourished has come from the Democratic Republic of Congo, which has suffered from a persistent conflict resulting in an increase from 11 million to 43 million chronically hungry people.

While South America has been one of the most successful sub-regions in reducing hunger, this success has not been uniform throughout the Latin American and Caribbean region. In Haiti, for example, 58 percent of the population suffers from chronic hunger.

The US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have had a direct, negative impact on levels of undernourishment in the Near East and North Africa regions, which have generally experienced some of the lowest levels of undernourishment. The number of chronically hungry undernourished persons in the region nearly doubled, from 15 million in 1990-92 to 28 million in 2003-2005. This number has increased by 4.9 million in Afghanistan, and by 4.1 million in Iraq.

While there has been some modest progress in Asia

and the Pacific regions, "nearly two-thirds of the world's hungry people still live in Asia," according to the FAO report.

Since 1992, barely a third of the developing countries have been able to reduce the number of those suffering from chronic hunger. The findings show that those hardest hit by increases in food prices were the poor, the landless, and female-headed households.

Low-income families are more likely to be "net food buyers," or households that consume a higher value of food staples than the value they produce, who stand to lose from an increase in the price of food staples.

While landowners are in a good position to gain from food price increases, the report notes, "Across the board, high food prices hit landless households hardest."

Female-headed households will also suffer proportionally more than male-headed households. This is due to female-headed households' tendency to spend a higher proportion of income on food, heightening the impact of food price increases, and the gender-specific obstacles that women face, which may restrict their access to certain resources such as land and credit.

Facing higher food prices, households may try to cope by changing the quality, quantity, and diversity of foods eaten, or make cuts in other areas such as health care and education. The first strategy results in malnutrition and higher risks of deficiencies in essential micronutrients, especially among women and children.

The story of Drissa Kone, living in Côte d'Ivoire, illustrates some of the problems that arise as individuals attempt to save money on medicine. Suffering from a severe respiratory infection, he has turned to counterfeit medicines, which sell for a fraction of the price of legitimate medicines but are of questionable quality and may even further harm his health.

The FAO has analyzed the key determinants of countries' vulnerability to high food prices: whether they are net importers of energy products and cereals, relative levels of poverty, and prevalence of undernourishment. The report discusses the diverse number of ways in which a food crisis can arise, resulting from both natural and man-made disasters.

Natural disasters can be classified by whether they are "slow onset" or "sudden onset." While slow onset disasters, such as droughts, have constituted the

majority of natural disasters, sudden onset disasters, such as hurricanes or earthquakes, increased from 14 percent of all natural disasters in the 1980s to 27 percent in 2000.

According to the FAO, man-made disasters include both war or conflict and socio-economic shocks that may be internal or external. War has been the primary cause of man-made disasters, although disasters arising from socio-economic shocks have risen from 2 percent in the 1980s to 27 percent in 2000.

As the WSWS wrote in a three-part series, "The world food crisis and the capitalist market," the sources of the current food crisis "lie in economic and political processes of privatization and price speculation that have unfolded over the past three decades and are bound up with the globalization of capitalist agriculture."

The world is presently reeling from a gigantic "socio-economic shock," in the form of a developing global financial crisis, which will inevitably exacerbate the world hunger crisis, as millions of people find themselves jobless, homeless, and are thrust deeper into poverty.

That nearly 1 billion people are suffering from hunger is yet another testament to the irrational allocation of resources under capitalism. As the foreword to the report notes: "Hunger has increased as the world has grown richer and produced more food than ever in the last decade."

While the capitalist mode of production has revolutionized the productive forces, developing the capacity to feed every person on earth and eliminate hunger, the social relations of production have become a fetter upon the realization of this goal. The FAO's *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2008* documents the devastating impact of the growth of social inequality—in the form of chronic hunger—on large numbers of the world's population.



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