

Almost 200 million children undernourished in poor countries

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There are currently 195 million children under five years of age in poorer countries whose growth is stunted due to chronic malnutrition, according to a UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) report released on Wednesday.

The report, *"Tracking Progress on Child and Maternal Nutrition"*, highlights the extraordinary suffering caused by entirely preventable illnesses, many of which arise from the basic lack of quality food.

The accompanying press release explains, "Undernutrition contributes to more than a third of all deaths in children under five. Undernutrition is often invisible until it is severe, and children who appear healthy may be at grave risk of serious and even permanent damage to their health and development."

UNICEF Executive Director Ann Veneman said, "Undernutrition steals a child's strength and makes illnesses that the body might otherwise fight off far more dangerous. More than one-third of children who die from pneumonia, diarrhea and other illnesses could have survived had they not been undernourished."

She goes on, "Those who survive undernutrition often suffer poorer physical health throughout their lives, and damaged cognitive abilities that limit their capacity to learn and to earn a decent income. They become trapped in an intergenerational cycle of ill-health and poverty."

The 124-page report details the causes and effects of undernutrition. Country-by-country statistics are charted. Advanced symptoms of malnutrition, such as low birth weight, stunting (low height for age) and wasting (low weight for age) are provided. The report takes stunted growth as a measure of chronic malnutrition.

In several countries, more than 50 percent of all children are stunted due to malnutrition, according to

UN estimates. These include Afghanistan, Yemen, Guatemala, Timor-Leste, Burundi, Madagascar, Malawi, Ethiopia and Rwanda.

India has the highest total number of stunted children—more than 60 million (48 percent of all children in India). This amounts to 31.2 percent of all stunted children in what the UN defines as the "developing world." In terms of absolute numbers, China is second, with 12.6 million.

The report is focused on poorer countries. However, a table at the end of the report ranks countries based on the number of stunted children. The United States, the only economically developed country in the list, appears as number 42 of 136, with 714,000 stunted children under five.

Also included in the document are statistics showing the results of very limited interventions promoting early breast-feeding and diet supplements. Funding these limited "cost-effective" strategies is at the core of the appeal that will be made at next week's UN Food Summit.

The summit in Rome follows a warning from the G8 summit in April that the global hunger crisis is a threat to international political stability. The WWSW wrote then that the G8 report "stresses that global food production must be doubled by the year 2050 in order to meet the needs of a growing world population."

The G8 wrote nervously that the growing food crisis would have "serious consequences not merely on business relations but equally on social and international relations, which in turn will impact directly on the security and stability of world politics." (See "G8 document on world hunger warns of global instability")

Last year's Rome Food Summit was only able to get commitments from participating member nations for a

small fraction of its appeal. The plea for \$30 billion resulted in only \$1 billion. Jacques Diouf, FAO general director, said at the time that the appeal had “generally fallen on deaf ears.”

The major powers have approached the question of mass starvation, made worse by the economic crisis, entirely from the standpoint of its implications for the “stability” of the political and economic system. Diouf notes, “It was only when the destitute and those excluded from the abundant tables of the rich took to the streets to voice their discontent and despair that the first reactions in support of food aid began to emerge.”

Even so, the aid made available has been minuscule, a tiny fraction of the sums made available to the financial elite in every major country.



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