

UN agencies warn of “looming catastrophe” as global hunger rises

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United Nations agencies reported last week that global hunger and the chronic inability to access food soared in 2021.

A staggering 2.3 billion (30 percent) of the world’s population were moderately or severely food insecure in 2021, with nearly 12 percent facing severe food insecurity. Millions across the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, Yemen and Syria already experiencing severe levels of hunger and poverty face the prospect of mass starvation.

This is set to worsen due to the US/NATO provoked war in Ukraine, with executive director of the UN’s World Food Program (WFP) David Beasley warning that the food crisis caused by the war would push countries into famine, causing “global destabilization, starvation and mass migration on an unprecedented scale.”

According to the WFP’s deputy director for research assessment Ronald Tran Ba Huy, 135 million people faced acute food insecurity before the pandemic in 2020. That figure had reached 276 million before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a figure set to increase to 335 million people in 82 countries in 2022.

The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022, published by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Food Programme (WFP), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and World Health Organization (WHO), said that up to 828 million people, nearly 11 percent of the world’s population, faced hunger last year. The number has grown by about 140 million since the start of the pandemic.

Undernourishment jumped from 8 percent in 2019 to 9.3 percent in 2020 and 9.8 percent in 2021. This has had a devastating impact on children. In 2020, an estimated 22 percent of children under five years of age were stunted, 6.7 percent wasted and 5.7 percent overweight. The report projects that nearly 670 million will still be undernourished in 2030.

Almost 3.1 billion people (40 percent) of the world’s population could not afford a healthy diet in 2020, an increase of 112 million since 2019 because of rising food prices stemming from the pandemic.

The UN agencies expect that nearly 670 million—8 percent of the world’s population—will still be facing hunger in 2030, the same level as in 2015 when the 2030 Agenda was launched with its target of Zero Hunger by 2030.

While the report blamed the war in Ukraine for skyrocketing food prices—food prices are 34 percent higher than a year ago and have reached their highest level since 1990—it failed to point out that the US government and its imperialist allies provoked the war and are intent on continuing it “for as long as it takes” to defeat Russia. They have imposed sanctions on Russia that have included banning the country from the SWIFT international money transfer system to destroy Russia’s economy by blocking its exports of fuel, food and fertilizers. This has driven up prices that were already soaring due to their failure to pursue a coronavirus elimination policy, thereby prolonging the pandemic, upending the world economy and disrupting global supply chains.

It is the world’s poorest both within and between countries that bear the heaviest burden, with 20 percent of people on the African continent facing hunger in 2021, compared to 9.1 percent in Asia, 8.6 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, 5.8 percent in Oceania, and under 2.5 percent in Northern America and Europe. As Oxfam pointed out in a recent report, *First Crisis, Then Catastrophe*, food accounts for 17 percent of consumer spending in wealthy countries, but as much as 40 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa. But even within the advanced economies, inflation is super-charging inequality. In the US, the poorest 20 percent of families spend 27 percent of their incomes on food, while the richest 20 percent spend

only 7 percent.

Global subsidies to the food and agriculture sector accounted for around \$630 billion a year from 2013 to 2018 and are likely to reach \$1.8 trillion a year by 2030. It is the giant agribusiness transnationals—the 10 largest of which are Cargill, ADM, Bayer, John Deere, CNH Industrial, Syngenta, DuPont, Nutrien, Yara International and BASF—that are most able to access subsidies. Some 70 percent of subsidies and state support go to producers, largely in the high-income countries, for staple foods, including cereals, roots and tubers, and meat and dairy at the expense of healthier, nutritious foods such as fruits, vegetables, pulses and seeds.

The report pathetically appealed to the advanced countries to consider “repurposing current public support to food and agriculture” that “often distorted market prices, did not reach small-scale farmers, hurt the environment, and did not promote nutritious food production.” This was the nearest it got to pinning responsibility for global hunger on capitalism—the economic system of producing food for profit, not need—and the subsidies provided by the world’s wealthiest governments to their own corporations.

Why these same governments, which have sent millions to their deaths during the pandemic and are inciting a nuclear war with Russia that would kill millions if not billions, would “repurpose” their agricultural support systems to save the world’s poorest from starvation, the report did not say.

The UN agencies ignored the rampant financial speculation and profit gouging that are driving food prices ever higher. To cite one example, a Lighthouse Reports investigation, *The Hunger Profiteers*, concluded that in April speculators were responsible for 72 percent of the buying activity on the Paris wheat market, up from 25 percent before the pandemic.

The report also glossed over the rising tide of social inequality and its causes that has made it impossible for so many workers to feed their families. Thanks to the massive handouts to the corporations as stock markets collapsed around the world at the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, the wealth of the world’s richest people soared more than in the previous 14 years combined, while global poverty deepened.

For most workers around the world, real-terms wages have continued to stagnate or even fall, while entire countries are forced ever deeper into poverty. The world’s poorest countries face defaulting on their debt repayments of \$43 billion in 2022. They are being forced

to slash public spending, including whatever limited social support they provide, to pay creditors and import food and fuel.

Last month, Wealth-X reported that there were 3,331 billionaires at the end of last year, up from 3,204 in 2020, one third of whom lived in North America. Their total wealth had surged by 17.8 percent to a record \$11.8 trillion, a sum equal to 12 percent of global GDP, while few governments increased taxes on the richest. Even a fraction of this enormous wealth would end global hunger, with research in 2020 sponsored by the FAO and other food agencies estimating the cost of ending hunger by 2030 was \$330 billion.

The UN agencies’ numerous appeals to the world’s richest countries for humanitarian aid have fallen on deaf ears as they turn their attention and resources to the war in Ukraine. They have pledged only about 18 percent of the \$1.46 billion needed for the Somali people who face mass starvation, forcing the UN to cut its rations to those in dire need of aid. The amount needed pales into insignificance beside the imperialists’ expenditure on war and militarism that they like to justify in the name of humanitarianism. Last month, the G7 leaders pledged an extra \$4.5 billion to tackle the food crisis, a fraction of the \$28.5 billion needed, sending the message that millions must starve.

World leaders are acutely aware of the repercussions of the spiraling cost of food as workers demand pay increases and take to the streets in protest over their deteriorating living conditions in rich and poor countries alike. But the fight for decent wages, affordable food, basic necessities and a massive increase in wages means that the working class must unite across workplaces, industries, countries and continents in a global political struggle against the capitalist class and its governments and to put an end to the imperialist war.



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