

## THE PREVALENCE OF HUNGER AND POVERTY

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Stemming the tide of human suffering caused by hunger and malnutrition remains now as ever in the past. The international community has yet to guarantee the human right to adequate food and health care. For long the message was clear. Hunger and malnutrition which in the world remains at once the challenge as well as very much an opportunity : a challenge to men's consciences and an opportunity to eradicate social injustice by measures which will increase economic prosperity. Eradication of hunger and malnutrition must not be seen only on account of its immediate and paramount importance, which is to improve the standard of living, but also on account of its influence on the total long-term economic outlook. The key causal factors determining nutrition status will need to be addressed and measures will need to be developed to improve the nutrition situation. It will be elaborated here that narrow pursuit of economic growth alone is not likely to solve the problems faced and more emphasis needs to be laid on social and human aspects of development. And also that increased access to food demands a wide range of policy adjustments at various levels to yield the deserved results. Regrettably, the encouraging progress in the international relations has not been matched by persistent progress in reducing hunger and mass poverty. Promises have been made that no child should go to bed hungry. Thus far, such promises as yet have not been kept by the world community.

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## CHANGING PERCEPTIONS ON FOOD SECURITY

Following World War II world agriculture was characterized by steady growth and stability. Global food production rose faster than population. Security of supplies was guaranteed by the presence of large surplus stocks in some countries. Nevertheless hundreds of millions faced stagnating or declining food availability. Natural disasters in the 1950 and 1960s occasionally produced severe shortages. Even though affecting large numbers of peoples, such disasters were essentially local -not worldwide - phenomena. Food aid provided a cushion and stock holding in most countries was considered uneconomic and not encouraged because import requirements could be met by trade at stable prices or by food aid. The world food crises of 1972-1974 differed radically from earlier and subsequent emergencies in intensity, coverage and important long-term implications. The crisis marked a transition from an era of abundant export supplies of cheap food and excess productive capacity to one of highly unstable supplies and prices. The crises focussed attention on the deficiencies and lack of foresight underlying agricultural policies of many developing and developed countries. The long-awaited Uruguay Round trade negotiations was again postponed, adding to growing protectionism. The world seemed to be losing its capacity to feed its rapidly growing population and to be incapable of controlling year to year variations in supplies.

The food security problem was considered manageable provided it commanded the political commitment of the entire international community. The World Food Conference of 1974 recommendations aimed at expanding food production in developing countries at a minimum rate of 4 percent per annum, by increasing investment and strengthening programmes on agricultural and rural development. As regards consumption, stress was laid on improving the diets of vulnerable groups. Also, expansion and liberalization of world trade was called for. New and threatening elements however remained. The economic recession of the 1970s hit hardest the low-income countries, added to their debt-servicing problems and further reduced their capacity to import and slowed down their economic growth. The food situation remained subject to instability in supplies, demand and prices notwithstanding the international measures taken such as on the establishment of a Global Information and Early Warning System, of an International Emergency Food Reserve, and some but little progress was made in liberating world trade and in stabilizing prices under the auspices of the General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade (GATT). World food security was to be sought through specific actions on a relative narrow front to ensure the physical availability of food supplies in the event of widespread crop failure. The focus was on an internationally coordinated system of nationally held-stocks, appropriate food aid programmes and long term trade agreement together with development of production in the more vulnerable countries. The elimination of chronic malnutrition and hunger thus became accepted as the ultimate goal of a strategy for food security. It was recognized that degrees of food security varied widely within countries and that temporary chronic malnutrition existed on a considerable scale, even if total food supplies at national level appeared satisfactory.

During the 1980's the concept of World Food Security was broadened to cover all its dimensions and components with the objective that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to the basic food needs. This demanded ensuring production of adequate food supplies together with maximizing stability in and securing access to available supplies by the consumer. Programmes to accelerate food production had to include an array of provisions to modernize the production process whereby such growth should not be achieved at the cost of equity and whereby the productivity of small farmers had to be increased and employment in the rural areas for the landless should be maximized. A systematic set of measures ready to be introduced in the event of crop shortfall was to be introduced. The need was recognized for national policy frameworks aimed at balanced growth in incomes and a reduction of poverty. This was to include increased opportunities for employment through labour intensive industries and asset-creating programmes, of rural public works and also through short term measures such as food-for-works programmes, food distribution and supplementary feeding schemes and food aid if properly channelled.

World food security became less a problem of global food supplies, notwithstanding the fact that a large number of developing countries lacked import capacity due to economic stagnation. It became more a problem of inadequate access to food supplies for vulnerable groups caused inter alia by lack of purchasing power. Emphasis was to be given to raise the level of household food security so that each household has the knowledge and ability to produce or to procure the food it needs on a sustainable basis. Proper distribution of food within the household is thereby of evident importance. Food security of household and individuals has now increasingly become the ultimate objective of world food security.

#### **HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION; CURRENT SITUATION**

Despite adequate global food production, the spectre of famine continues to haunt some 800 million people in some developing regions. Starvation and death caused by hunger and malnutrition is still occurring in a number of countries and this grim reality has become almost a yearly repetition of the tragedy that besets them. The overall picture of global hunger in 1992 is disquieting although progress in reducing hunger in some developing regions is encouraging. The deterioration of social and economic conditions in a great many low-income countries must be viewed with great concern, and together with, but to a lesser extent, the economies in transition are faced with most difficult years ahead.

As a result of the diverse trends in economic growth among the developing countries in recent years, and coupled with significant variations in their development policy, remarkable progress has been made in some countries in reducing chronic hunger and abject poverty, especially in East and South Asia. The situation has deteriorated in Africa, Latin America and The Caribbean. That picture, which emerged in the 1980s continued into the beginning of this decade. In as much as food security is not just a

supply issue, but also a function of income and purchasing power, the hunger and poverty situation evolved in this mixed setting of epoch-making policy changes with variable degrees of improvement. The figures in the table below serve to provide a basic indicator of the trends in the incidence of abject poverty in the developing regions rather than a precise measurement of its magnitude. It should be pointed out that while the trend movements with respect to poverty indicate an aggregate number of the extremely poor, defined as people unable to attain a minimal standard of living, this should not conceal considerable variations within countries and individual regions stressing the need to maintain strong momentums in growth, while continuing to promote human-centered development policies.

The situation of abject poverty in developing countries

Region	Situation in 1985		Situation in 1991	
	number (millions)	share of total abject poverty (percent)	number (millions)	share of total abject poverty (percent)
Sub-Saharan Africa	120	19	140	24
East Asia	120	19	69	14
China	80	13	39	9
South Asia	300	48	260	45
India	250	40	205	36
Middle East/N. Africa	40	6	46	8
L. America/Caribbean	50	8	53	9
Developing All	630	100	569	100

While the rate of growth of world food supply continued to outstrip that of population, the per caput food supply or available levels reflect average food and nutrition situations and assessment of relative adequacy can be misleading. Inequity in distribution of available food will effect the prevalence of chronic undernutrition and the proportion of the population who on average during the course of a year did not consume enough food to maintain body weight and support light activity. The following table presents the prevalence estimates for the four developing regions. For the developing regions as a whole the declines in the percentage in the 1970s and 1980s were sufficiently large to outpace population growth and thus lead to a decline in absolute numbers. However, in Africa, where the percentage was lower than in the Far East, the decline in the 1970s was not fast enough to outpace population growth and the number of under nourished rose also on account of considerable declines in per capita food supply and of a negative

average annual growth of real GDP per person. Only the Far East maintained the declining trend. The Near East and Latin America experienced no change in percentage undernourished so that the number grew due to population growth. Because of the large population involved the largest number continued to be in the Far East.

Prevalence of chronic under nutrition in developing regions

Region	Period	Total population (million)	Chronically undernourished	
			%	Number (million)
Africa	1969-71	288	35	101
	1979-81	384	33	128
	1988-90	505	33	163
Far East	1969-71	1.880	40	751
	1979-81	2.311	28	645
	1988-90	2.731	19	528
Latin America	1969-71	281	19	54
	1979-81	357	13	47
	1988-90	433	13	59
Near East	1969-71	160	22	35
	1979-81	210	12	24
	1988-90	269	12	31
All regions .	1969-71	2.609	36	941
	1979-81	3.262	26	844
	1988-90	3.938	20	786

Child malnutrition in many parts of the developing world has been deteriorating in recent years, notwithstanding the decline in mortality rates. By preliminary figures the total number of undernourished children, under the age of five, rose in the last decade to now about 200 million, although their share probably declined. Sub-Saharan Africa witnessed a rise in both the absolute number of malnourished children, and their share in total child population. Despite the decreases in the proportion of malnourished children, most Asian countries did not succeed in combatting child malnutrition on a scale to that

in poverty reduction. As a result, the great majority of malnourished children are still to be found in Asia. Ongoing progress in the universal immunization campaign is now preventing over 3 million child deaths per year. What stands out is that some 40 countries with the highest under-five-mortality rate have made the least headway, far too slow to permit them to reach the target of a child mortality rate of 70 per 1000 live birth by the year 2000 set by the 1990 World Summit for Children.

Underweight children in developing regions

Region	Situation in 1980		Situation in 1985		Situation in 1990	
	number <sup>a</sup>	percent <sup>b</sup>	number <sup>a</sup>	percent <sup>b</sup>	number <sup>a</sup>	percent <sup>b</sup>
Sub-Saharan Africa	21	29.1	26.1	31.1	30.2	30.8
Near East/N. Africa	5	17.2	5	15.1	4.8	13.3
South Asia	89.9	63.6	100	61.1	101.1	58.6
South-East Asia	23.4	42.8	23.4	40	22.4	37.7
China	20.4	23.8	21.1	21.3	23.6	21
C. America/Caribbean	3.1	17.7	2.8	15.2	3	15.3
South America	4.4	13.2	3.6	10.1	3	8.2
Developing All	167	38.1	182	36.9	188	34.8

<sup>a</sup>millions

<sup>b</sup>percentage share of total under-5child population

Mortality of children under the age of five in developing regions

Region	Number of deaths			Mortality rate		
	(millions)			(deaths per 1000 live births)		
	1975-80	1980-85	1990	1975-80	1980-85	1990
Sub-Saharan Africa	3.5	3.8	4.2	218	203	170
Near East/N. Africa	1.1	0.9	1.1	159	128	80
C. America/Caribbean	0.4	0.4	0.3	99	87	78
South America	0.7	0.7	0.6	101	89	55
South Asia	6.8	6.2	5.7	203	177	169
South-East Asia	1.6	1.3	1.1	129	111	69
China	1.2	1.1	1.0	58	55	42
Developing All	15.3	14.4	13.9	152	138	108

Nutritional deficiency diseases, which are easier to control and at much less cost than other forms of hunger and malnutrition, tend to be persistent at a large scale such as vitamin a, iodine and iron deficiency. Worldwide at least 190 million pre-school children are at the risk of Vitamin A deficiency with approximately 350.000 victims going blind. Iodine deficiency causing a spectra of effects of growth and development and worldwide affects some 1000 million people and is most serious in South and East Asia. Iron deficiency affects at least 800 million people, With encouraging results obtained most control programmes under way appear now to be gearing up for a major attack on these deficiency diseases.

The food insecure are there by to be focussed in both urban and rural areas. Urban poverty tends to be found quantitatively more important in some middle-income countries, while in most low-income countries. The poor and food insecure tend to be disproportionately concentrated in rural areas, comprising mainly the landless and small farmers. These have been referred to as "structural poor". In addition, there is a segment of the population referred to as the "new poor" including those who have become poor as result of economic changes. The unemployed migrants to cities and landless labourers whose services are no longer required are likely to account for the bulk of the new poor.

Specific reference must be made to the incidence of widespread and severe malnutrition among refugees and displaced persons with rates among such groups as high as 45 percent and major outbreaks on a unprecedented scale of the deficiency diseases. Armed conflicts that have been raging for years in the famine-stricken countries have interrupted production and economic activity in general and severely curtailed food distribution.

#### **DETERMINANTS OF NUTRITION STATUS; BEYOND INCOME AND FOOD**

Inadequate dietary intake and poor health are considered the immediate causes of malnutrition which are mostly dictated by the underlying causes of household food security related to producing and acquiring food, of health services and of maternal and child care. Education very much influences the manner in which food security can be achieved, health services can be utilized and a healthy environment for all family members can be aimed for. With availability and access to food remaining a main determinant, evidence suggests that where a choices have to be made education should be given high priority with the provision of low-cost health interventions coming a close second.

Specific measures will be needed to protect food security of the vulnerable groups. Such measures should be designed based on the understanding on the nature, the incidence and the sources of food insecurity as these usually tend to be location and socio-economic specific. With food security of households being now the ultimate objective of food security, the importance of adequacy and sustainability of economic and physical access to food will need to be addressed, both conceptual and practical, and whereby the critical contribution of non-food factors must be recognized. There is ample evidence of hunger even when food is locally available.

The combination of policies appropriate for a country in addressing and how best sequencing actions with respect to the concept of food security at the household level will by necessity be based on defining the different elements like adequacy, accessibility, stability and sustainability. A necessary precondition is that an adequate amount of food is available within the physical reach of all households, whether through own production or through the market. Adequacy of food at the national level can be monitored based on total supply relative to total requirements. Ideally, per caput food availability would be a good indicator of adequacy. Domestic production where needed are to be supplemented by commercial imports the country can afford without due economic dislocation. Apart from adequacy, insuring household physical access remains a serious problem in many parts of the world with problems such as poor infrastructure, inadequate logistics for food distribution and market imperfections. Monitoring of stock positions overtime and across major regions of a country is one way to spot abnormalities in the orderly flow of basic food. An alternative is to approach it indirectly by focussing on price differences across markets as an indication of supply problems.

Food security at the level of households can be ensured only when it has a capability to acquire the food needed, from own production, through income generating activities including wage employment and transfer from sources external to the household with the sum commanding what may be called the household ability or entitlement to food. access to food may be lost when one or more of the components breaks down. An operational income of effective demand is real income defined in terms of nominal income and prices. Such can be assessed by household income surveys, percent GDP and income distribution, wage data and changes in relevant production sectors. These are not mutually exclusive or can even be complementary in the better understanding of determining economic access to food. To improve economic access to food a large number of countries have implemented substantial transfer and subsidy programmes in some sort. Prices of food baskets remain an important determinant and directly influence the level of food purchases and provide a good barometer in that they respond fairly quickly to changes in the food demand and supply situation.

An often neglected component of household food security concerns the capability of households to ensure continuous access to food in the long run. Coping with food security during food crises and famine range from sales of assets, borrowing, migration, over exploitation of common and private natural resources which later may not be able to recoup. Critical components of the household overall entitlement may well be used in an unsustainable rate, leading to loss of assets such as land, livestock, capital, health, education, culture. This demands high priority within a household food security system with long-term sustainability of access to be based on ownership of land, value of assets, indebtedness, quality of human capital.

One of the major problems remains is selecting appropriate indications to describe the multi-dimensional concept of household food security, and to arrive at policies appropriate for implementing timely the necessary measures. This applies in particular



to the in-house hold distribution whereby cultural and religious factors are found to play an evident role and which remains complicated to address. On the physical access side, two conditions are considered particularly important, namely adequacy of food at the local level and its physical accessibility to all vulnerable households. Similarly on the economic access side, nominal income, public transfers and food prices are key determinants. Clarity in understanding the underlying sources of food insecurity will determine the extent in which appropriate and effective policies and programmes can be developed.

The burning issues of poverty and food insecurity have received unprecedented emphasis in recent years, particularly reflecting the adverse effects of economic adjustment programmes and recurring famines. Targets that the world community sets must be seen as desirable objectives and as indications of the direction that development should take, rather than as carefully calculated projections of what is feasible and realistic. It has its advocates, as they will provide a conducive environment and political pressure for their serious pursuit. It has its critics who maintain that targets have no price tag, are not differentiated according to different country needs, do not have plans for implementation. They however provide key indicators, such as complete immunization of all children, reduction of the under-five children mortality by half, elimination of severe malnutrition, universal enrolment of all children of primary school age, reduction of the adult illiteracy by half-equal for female and male, and universal access to safe water. More needs to be known about how inputs relate to outputs when identifying and sequencing potential cost-effective and efficient policies for restructuring within the social sectors demanding comprehensive insight in sociological-cultural, economical, medical, biological and public health fields.

### **ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL MEASURES TO COMBAT HUNGER**

The ultimate objective of food security is to assure an adequate and stable supply of food to the entire population throughout the year. Satisfactory production and stability in supply must be matched by a reduction in poverty and an increase in effective demand particularly by those who are poor and unable to procure sufficient food. The long term answer lies in a balanced and equitable national economic development strategy which would include in addition to increasing food production, growth in employment, income and community services. In the short term, however, increasing the income of the poor households through market interventions or targeted distribution programmes can improve the access to food.

Given the present domestic and international economic environment, many developing countries have no alternative but to undertake a series of measures to restructure their economics and implement structural adjustment programmes supported by the World Bank and stabilization programmes supported mainly by the IMF. While adjustment programmes vary substantially from country to country, most of them are aimed to reduce domestic demand, bringing it in line with changes in the area of trade and exchange rate policies, monetary and financial policies, fiscal and budgetary policies, and

pricing and institutional reforms especially as regards the agricultural sector. There is a growing consensus that there appears an asymmetry between negative and positive effects of adjustment. Negative effects on the poor are often certain and immediate, whereas the positive effects on the economy are more uncertain and have long gestation periods. Initial shortcomings in adapting the concept, design and implementation to the domestic realities of developing countries have resulted in a search for ways to modify the adjustment programmes especially in relation to the poor and food insecure. Possible options to initiate the impact of adjustment on the nutritional status of the poor include schemes which aim at lowering the cost of food, targeting food supplies to vulnerable households, and raising the employment and income generating capacity of the poor. Many countries have already had experience with various programmes to improve access to food by the poor, through price subsidies, food-for-work programmes, food stamp schemes, employment schemes, credit for small farmers, and other programmes to foster the participation of the poor in the process of economic development and growth. Adjustment programmes at both the design and implementation stages need to include specific provisions to ensure the active participation of the poor in the development process and include measures that lead to redistribution of income and assets. Neglect of this will lead otherwise to widespread suffering and food insecurity among the vulnerable groups in the majority of developing countries that implement adjustment programmes.

This very much relates to broadening the scope for increased agricultural production utilizing the unbolt capacity of a large number of countries with resources to produce adequate food and thus are in a position to release foreign exchange for other developmental investments. Food and livestock production will provide income to some of the most food-insecure groups in the least developed countries, the small farmer, the pastoralist, the fisherman. The small farmers, being usually more productive than large scale agricultural enterprises, particularly when adapting new techniques when appropriate, with access to productive assets would not only improve the overall efficiency of resources utilization but would also have benefits which go beyond increases in acreage output. The high productive potential of the rural community and the fact that adjustment programmes in many cases do not explicitly attempt to reach them suggest considerable scope for improvement.

There remains an urgent need to improve monitoring of the effects of adjustment not just on aggregate macro variables but also on micro-level variables such as the nutritional status of the different sections of the poor. There is no automatic link between economic growth and human progress but to exploit fully the opportunities for improved well-being that growth offers, economic growth needs to be properly managed. One of the most pertinent policy issues concerns the exact process through which growth translates, or fails to translate, into humane development under different development conditions. A fundamental need therefor is to focus the attention of planner and policy makers on nutritional status as one of the main indicators of development so that improvements in human welfare become primary objectives of the development process. So, promoting human development is important, not only in itself, but also as a critical input to the

growth process. Growth with equity, even at the cost of optimal efficiency is thereby needed to achieve human development.

Safety nets for the vulnerable population i.e. programmes aimed at improving access to food on the part of vulnerable households will be needed in most countries since a segment of the population will continue to be bypassed by the development process, with specific measures depending upon specific country situation. Lately displaced persons and refugees have joined the ranks of the vulnerable, who have lost their productive base and need to be covered by concerted efforts and a sort of safety net. The selection of particular instruments is often guided not only by the nature of the malnutrition problem but also by other social objectives but the intervention will need to be targeted on the basis of proper assessment of the constraints faced by poor households to achieve adequate access to food. A large number of countries have intervened in some way to assist poor families to improve their access to food. There are no universal guidelines for programme design which could be followed in all situations. Costs and impact together with the long term effects and the extent to which they contribute to ameliorating the status of the poor in a lasting way will determine the choice of the safety net to be provided.

In summary, to prevent the famine threat, a dual approach is called for that will address both the root causes of famine and the inadequacy of public response. Famine today is recognized as a tragic consequence of deprivation and underdevelopment, reflecting the vulnerability of the poor and deprived to natural and man-made disasters. Its final elimination depends on long term social and economic development. On a household basis, this means that there should be sustained income flows and asset creation for the poor to reduce their vulnerability, together with investments for human resource development.

At the national level governments have established a variety of social and food security programmes, including transfers to mitigate the impact of poverty but often do not possess the resources necessary for such interventions as a large and continuous scale. Policies in tackling the food security situation aim at overcoming imbalance and structural food problems with regard to production, marketing, stock holding, consumption and trade; including initiatives leading to liberalization with the private sector taking an increasingly prominent role. Most are fairly recent and hence it is too early to evaluate their impact on food production and food security on the long term. Much will depend upon how the agricultural sector, including the farmers, will be able to respond to the incentives generated. In the long run, it also requires sustainable farming to arrest degeneration of natural sources by soil depletion, deforestation and desertification. Developments at the global economy warrants restrictive optimism only since trade relations and protectionism remain on the agenda of the Uruguay Round of Trade negotiations and most in debted developing countries face problems of restrictive finances and in servicing their debts.

References consulted include Reports of the Committee on World Food Security of FAO, the reports on The State of Food and Agriculture of FAO, the reports by the

World Food Council, UNDP Human Development Reports and World Bank Development Reports.