

World hunger report: 842 million starve in the midst of plenty

By Barry Mason
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World hunger is increasing, with an estimated 842 million people going to bed hungry every night. Most people suffering from hunger live in Africa and Latin America, but 34 million are in the former Soviet Union and 10 million live in the rich industrialised countries.

This startling evidence of the growing division between rich and poor on a world scale appears in a recent report published by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

Halving hunger was one of the UN Millennium Development Goals announced in 1992. The number of people experiencing hunger was supposed to be halved by 2015. Rather than decreasing as the FAO anticipated, the number of hungry people has increased by 4.5 million a year between 1995 and 1997 and from 1999 to 2001. Improved nutrition in some countries is being more than offset by a decline in others.

Amongst the group of countries that suffered a reversal of falling numbers of malnourished were some with large populations such as Sudan, Pakistan, Nigeria, Indonesia and India. The report states, “With reversals in many large countries and progress slowing in others, the pattern of change in the developing countries as a whole shifted from a declining to a rising trend. Between 1995-1997 and 1999-2001, the number of hungry people in the developing countries increased by 18 million wiping out almost half the decrease of 37 million achieved during the previous five years. Unless significant gains are made in large countries where progress has stalled, it will be difficult to reverse this negative trend.”

The FAO report highlights the increase in the number of undernourished in those countries it classifies as in transition. It is mainly referring to the countries of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Figures for 1993-1995 of 25 million undernourished increased to 34 million for 1999-2001—the bulk of the increase being in the Commonwealth of Independent States (the former USSR), which now has nearly 29 million or 10 percent of the population classified as chronically hungry.

In these countries the report notes, “Economic transition has been accompanied by far-reaching political and administrative changes that have disrupted trade and exchange relations and led to severe foreign exchange shortages. In addition, agricultural production and marketing systems have broken

down.”

HIV/AIDS plays a crucial role in the growth of hunger. The report states, “The food crisis that threatened more than 14 million people in Southern Africa in 2002-2003 brought into sharp focus the interactions between HIV/AIDS and food security. It demonstrated that hunger cannot be combated effectively in regions ravaged by AIDS, unless interventions address the particular needs of AIDS-affected households and incorporate measures to prevent and to mitigate the spread of HIV/AIDS.”

Those countries where hunger has declined generally do not have a high incidence of AIDS and have not been hit by natural disasters such as drought. Their improvement is extremely precarious and AIDS is spreading rapidly in many of them. Improved nutrition in China and India could soon be reversed.

Reports from Southern Africa have warned of a new kind of emergency in which short-term food shortages overlap with “an unprecedented collapse of health, agricultural production and food security that will endure for decades.”

The FAO predict that the AIDS epidemic will stretch well into the century. In mainly claiming the lives of young adults, HIV is severely reducing the number of agricultural workers. The population left is dominated by the very young and the very old.

The report states that by 2020 HIV will have killed 20 percent of the agricultural workforce in Southern African and that currently 60-70 percent of farms are affected by loss of agricultural workers. With the death of young adults the transmission of agricultural knowledge and skills to the next generation is being prevented.

Famine worsens the AIDS epidemic because those affected by famine are more liable to move off the land to urban centres, where the risk of HIV infection is higher and women and children may end up selling sex for money and food—thus becoming more vulnerable to HIV infection. Hunger also makes those already infected with HIV more susceptible to opportunistic infections. Once they have developed full-blown AIDS their capacity to absorb nutrition from food is reduced. Even with drug therapy HIV/AIDS sufferers need to have access to a better diet to help fight the effects of the disease.

In a November 28 press release the World Food Programme

Executive Director explained, “Without food aid, the poorest people with HIV will always have to choose between access to medical treatment and their next meal—even where drugs may be free. We are talking about whether to spend money on a bus fare to the nearest clinic or buy basic foodstuffs. No one should have to make that choice.”

Some experts are beginning to talk about the interaction between HIV and hunger as “new variant famine”—some have referred to the conjunction as the “perfect storm.” In Zambia the deadly combination is known as the “ugly sisters.” Following a tour of Zambia last year the UN secretary general’s AIDS envoy, Stephen Lewis, said, “It is an absolutely unanswerable measure of AIDS on the one hand and hunger on another hand ... and it leads to a kind of downward spiral on a country, which becomes irreversible if a country does not fight back.”

This sentiment was echoed recently by Save the Children’s Southern Africa regional director, Greg Ramm, who warned, “We are in a downward spiral. The region as a whole is much more vulnerable to minor shocks than it ever has been before.”

Drought has a major impact on food production. The report explains that it accounts for 60 percent of food emergencies. Africa is the driest continent after Australasia, but other countries are affected by erratic rainfall. India receives 70 percent of its rainfall within the short three-month monsoon period. The report stresses the importance of the provision of irrigation, explaining that whilst globally only 17 percent of cropland is irrigated this irrigated cropland provides 40 percent of the world’s food supply.

The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) held a conference in November in Nairobi under the title Challenge Programme on Water and Food. The conference included scientists, policy-makers and NGOs who met to discuss the issue of food and water.

A statement issued at a press conference to launch the meeting stated, “The region [sub-Saharan Africa] will face a 23 percent shortfall in crop yields due to insufficient water supply and cereal imports will have to more than triple to 35 million tons in the next 23 years to keep pace with demand. Under these conditions many poorer African countries will be unable to finance the required imports of food leading to rising levels of hunger and malnutrition and greater dependence on international financial support for food aid.”

The statement quotes the Chairman of the Challenge Programme on Water and Food Consortium, Professor Frank Rijsberman:

“If present trends continue the livelihoods of one third of the world’s population will be affected by water scarcity by 2025. We could be facing annual losses equivalent to the entire grain crops of India and the US combined. The crisis has to be addressed comprehensively at all levels, from the way farmers use water to international policy decisions that affect reforms and investments in water management and infrastructure.”

Global warming and associated climate change is also having an effect. At the recent climate talks in Milan on the Kyoto protocol, UN organisations reported that effects of climate change were leading to an extra 150,000 extra deaths a year. Globally growing seasons are being shortened, adding to malnutrition.

Faced with this mounting crisis the FAO has little to offer. It can only document an unfolding human catastrophe. FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf writes in the foreword to the report, “If the latest data tend to confirm our understanding of factors that contribute to food security, they also confront us with another difficult question: if we already know the basic parameters of what needs to be done, why have we allowed hundreds of millions of people to go hungry in a world that produces more than enough food for every woman, man and child? Bluntly stated, the problem is not so much a lack of food as a lack of political will.”

The expertise to address the problem of world hunger exists, but the political will does not exist on the part of the ruling class in the most powerful industrialised countries. Dr. Tewolde Egziabher of the Ethiopian Environmental Protection Authority recently pointed to one of the ways in which the West has prevented Ethiopia becoming self-sufficient in food. Western governments and international financial institutions have insisted that the private sector must control the Ethiopian food supply. They have prevented the government building granaries and food depots that could store grain from one year to the next. As a result, over the last three years Ethiopia has experienced record harvests but now faces famine again.

Ethiopia’s experience reveals the extent to which the growth in world hunger is a manmade phenomenon. Prior to the reintroduction of capitalism hunger was unknown in the Soviet Union during peace time, despite a monumentally bureaucratic system of production and distribution. Now 34 million people are chronically hungry in countries where the agricultural land is as potentially productive as any to be found in the United States or Canada.

The FAO offer no analysis of why 10 million go hungry in the most industrialised countries. But their existence is an indictment of the growing gap between the rich and the poor in the advanced capitalist states. The figure shows that hunger is not limited to particular continents, but is even affecting growing numbers of workers in the Western countries.

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