

1.02 billion people hungry

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One sixth of humanity undernourished - more than ever before



The faces behind the numbers.

19 June 2009, Rome - World hunger is projected to reach a historic high in 2009 with 1 020 million people going hungry every day, according to new estimates published by FAO today.

The most recent increase in hunger is not the consequence of poor global harvests but is caused by the world economic crisis that has resulted in lower incomes and increased unemployment. This has reduced access to food by the poor, the UN agency said.

"A dangerous mix of the global economic slowdown combined with stubbornly high food prices in many countries has pushed some 100 million more people than last year into chronic hunger and poverty," said FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf. "The silent hunger crisis — affecting one sixth of all of humanity — poses a serious risk for world peace and security. We urgently need to forge a broad consensus on the total and rapid eradication of hunger in the world and to take the necessary actions."

"The present situation of world food insecurity cannot leave us indifferent," he added.

Poor countries, Diouf stressed, "must be given the development, economic and policy tools required to boost their agricultural production and productivity. Investment in agriculture must be increased because for the majority of poor countries a healthy agricultural sector is essential to overcome poverty and hunger and is a pre-requisite for overall economic growth."

"Many of the world's poor and hungry are smallholder farmers in developing countries. Yet they have the potential not only to meet their own needs but to boost food security and catalyse broader economic growth. To unleash this potential and reduce the number of hungry people in the world, governments, supported by the international community, need to protect core investments in agriculture so that smallholder farmers have access not only to seeds and fertilisers but to tailored technologies, infrastructure, rural finance, and markets," said Kanayo F. Nwanze, President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

"For most developing countries there is little doubt that investing in smallholder agriculture is the most sustainable safety net, particularly during a time of global economic crisis," Nwanze added.

"The rapid march of urgent hunger continues to unleash an enormous humanitarian crisis. The world must pull together to ensure emergency needs are met as long term solutions are advanced," said Josette Sheeran, Executive Director of the UN World Food Programme.

Hunger on the rise

Whereas good progress was made in reducing chronic hunger in the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, hunger has been slowly but steadily on the rise for the past decade, FAO said. The number of hungry people increased between 1995-97 and 2004-06 in all regions except Latin America and the Caribbean. But even in this region, gains in hunger reduction have been reversed as a result of high food prices and the current global economic downturn.

This year, mainly due to the shocks of the economic crisis combined with often high national food prices, the number of hungry people is expected to grow overall by about 11 percent, FAO projects, drawing on analysis by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Almost all of the world's undernourished live in developing countries. In Asia and the Pacific, an estimated 642 million people are suffering from chronic hunger; in Sub-Saharan Africa 265 million; in Latin America and the Caribbean 53 million; in the Near East and North Africa 42 million; and in developed countries 15 million in total.

In the grip of the crisis

The urban poor will probably face the most severe problems in coping with the global recession, because lower export demand and reduced foreign direct investment are more likely to hit urban jobs harder. But rural areas will not be spared. Millions of urban migrants will have to return to the countryside, forcing the rural poor to share the burden in many cases.

Some developing countries are also struggling with the fact that money transfers (remittances) sent from migrants back home have declined substantially this year, causing the loss of foreign exchange and household income. Reduced remittances and a projected decline in official development assistance will further limit the ability of countries to access capital for sustaining production and creating safety nets and social protection schemes for the poor.

Unlike previous crises, developing countries have less room to adjust to the deteriorating economic conditions, because the turmoil is affecting practically all parts of the world more or less simultaneously. The scope for remedial mechanisms, including exchange-rate depreciation and borrowing from international capital markets for example, to adjust to macroeconomic shocks, is more limited in a global crisis.

The economic crisis also comes on the heel of the food and fuel crisis of 2006-08. While food prices in world markets declined over the past months, domestic prices in developing countries came down more slowly. They remained on average 24 percent higher in real terms by the end of 2008 compared to 2006. For poor consumers, who spend up to 60 percent of their incomes on staple foods, this means a strong reduction in their effective purchasing power. It should also be noted that while they declined, international food commodity prices are still 24 percent higher than in 2006 and 33 percent higher than in 2005.

The 2009 hunger report (The State of Food Insecurity in the World, SOFI) will be presented in October.

<http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/20568/icode/>