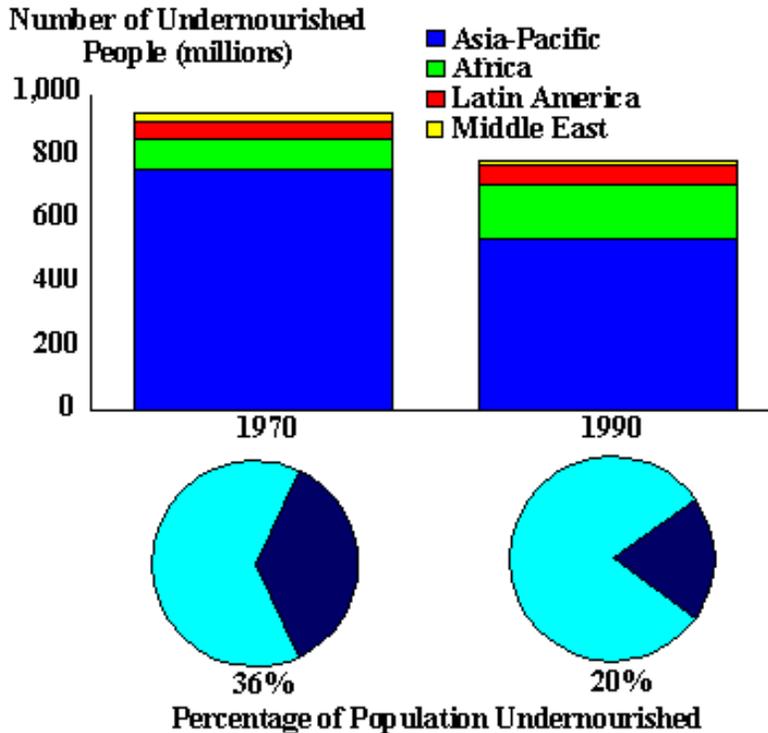


Causes of Hunger

by Marc J. Cohen and Don Reeves

The persistence of hunger in a world of plenty is the most profound moral contradiction of our age. Nearly 800 million people in the developing world (20 percent of the total population) are chronically undernourished. At least 2 billion suffer from vitamin and mineral deficiencies. Yet since the mid-1970s the world has produced enough food to provide everyone with a minimally adequate diet.

Figure 1—Chronically undernourished population in developing countries by continent, 1970 and 1990



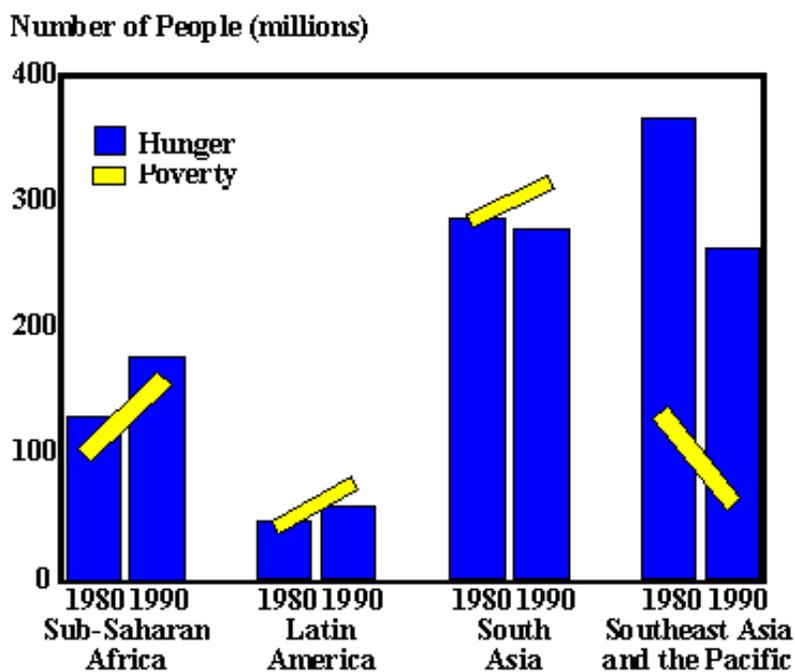
Source: United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination/Sub-Committee on Nutrition.

The Geography of Hunger

The number of undernourished people in developing countries fell from 942 million in 1970 to 786 million in 1990 and from 36 percent to 20 percent of the population (Figure 1). The poorest and most food-insecure people are disproportionately in Africa. The largest number of chronically

undernourished people live in the Asia-Pacific region, although the number dropped from 762 million in 1970 to 540 million in 1990 (from 40 to 20 percent of the population). However, hunger remains especially severe in South Asia (Figure 2). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the number of hungry people rose from 94 million in 1970 to 175 million in 1990. Growing poverty, debt, economic decline, poor terms of trade, rapid population growth, unfavorable weather, war, and governmental collapse have all contributed to the continent's food problems. In the United States, the share of the population facing hunger rose from 8 percent in 1985 to 12 percent in 1990 (from 20 to 30 million). But hunger in wealthy nations is neither as severe nor as widespread as in developing countries.

Figure 2--Number of poor and hungry people, 1980 and 1990



Sources: United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination/Sub-Committee on Nutrition; Institute for Development Studies.

Causes of Hunger

Hunger is one piece of a complex of interrelated social ills. It is linked intricately to global economic, political, and social power structures; modes of development and consumption; population dynamics; and social biases based on race, ethnicity, gender, and age.

(1) Poverty and powerlessness. One of the main causes of hunger is poverty--lack of purchasing power and access to resources. Worldwide, 1.3 billion people live on less than US\$1 per day. Nearly one-third of the people in developing countries are poor; the figure rises to 70 to 80

percent of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Poverty is linked not only with poor national economic performance but also with an unequal distribution of income and a political structure that renders poor people powerless, whether in a democracy or a dictatorship.

Mustering the political will to make policies that fight hunger and favor a more equitable distribution of income a top government priority requires a strong public constituency. Popular movements and government policy can work to end the spiral of powerlessness. In such diverse places as Brazil, Zimbabwe, and the Indian state of Kerala, popular movements have pressed governments to end hunger. In South Korea the government enacted public policies that fostered economic growth accompanied by decreasing income inequality.

(2) Population, consumption, and the environment. The world's population is expected to grow from its current 5.5 billion to about 8 billion by 2020; more than 93 percent of this increase will occur in lower-income countries. Debate is ongoing over whether the earth can support its growing population without severe ecological damage. Even if the world's population stabilizes by the mid-21st century, food production will have to double. Pessimists see this requirement as beyond the planet's "carrying capacity." Optimists expect continued innovations, such as the recent breakthrough in rice breeding, to meet this demand.

Fresh water, land, forests, and fisheries are today being used at or beyond capacity. In the competition for resources, poor and hungry people, lacking economic and political clout, become even more marginalized. Especially in countries where landholdings are inequitable, poor families are forced to move onto fragile land and often to overcrowded cities.

Globally, incomes and consumption differ starkly. Twenty percent of the world's population--mostly in industrial countries--receives 85 percent of the world's income and accounts for 80 percent of consumption, producing two-thirds of all greenhouse gases and 90 percent of ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons. This level of consumption is not sustainable at the global level. If the current global population lived as the richest 20 percent do, consumption of energy would increase 10 times and minerals 200 times.

Policymakers on all levels need to shape integrated policies and programs that reflect the relationship between improved lives for poor people and reduced population growth, reduced consumption of nonrenewable resources, and protection of the environment.

(3) Violence and militarism. New and continuing civil strife are the source of severe human disasters in Afghanistan, Burma, Mozambique, Nagorno-Karabakh, Rwanda, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, the former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere. Most victims of these conflicts are innocent civilians, not combatants. A study by Frances Stewart found that in 14 of 16 developing countries at war since 1970, per capita food consumption dropped, by more than 15 percent in 6 of them.

War slows or stops food production and marketing. Food supplies are plundered and used as

instruments of war, crop cycles are interrupted, seeds and breeding livestock are consumed in desperation, and children suffer permanent damage as a result of insufficient food.

Even if fighting never occurs, heavy military spending drains resources away from food production, education, and health care. Global military spending declined from its peak of \$1 trillion in 1987 to an estimated \$767 billion (still more than the total income of the poorest 45 percent of the world's population) in 1994. Some of the savings have shifted to national social programs, but none have gone to international development assistance. Developing countries spend \$125 billion per year on military forces. One-quarter of this would provide primary health care for all their citizens, reduce adult literacy by half, and provide family planning to all willing couples.

(4) Racism and ethnocentrism. Racial discrimination and competition between ethnic groups have caused hunger, malnutrition, and resource deprivation for black populations in South Africa and the Americas, Indians in Latin America, Kurds in Iraq, and Tamils in Sri Lanka, to name just a few. In Sudan, discrimination against the black Christian and animist south by the predominantly Arab Muslim north has locked the country in civil war for decades. Both sides use food as a weapon, and malnutrition rates are the highest ever documented--80 percent in some areas. In recent years, 1.3 million people have died from famine and disease. In 1994, the United Nations estimated that 2.5 million Sudanese required food aid. Between 1980 and 1991, per capita food production in the south declined by 29 percent.

While the problems are immense and complicated, some countries have triumphed over racial differences. Zimbabwe has achieved social integration without substantial racial strife, offering a model for achieving multiracial democracy and reduced hunger in nearby South Africa.

(5) Gender discrimination. Because women bear and nourish children, they have special nutritional needs. Yet women of every age have disproportionately higher rates of malnutrition than men and are overrepresented among poor, illiterate, and displaced people. Malnutrition among mothers also has a negative effect on the growth of children.

Almost universally women work longer hours than men and carry primary responsibility for household chores even when working outside the home. Women's pay rates are nearly universally lower than those for men (on average, 30 to 40 percent lower), even for equivalent work.

Women's needs and rights are receiving greater weight in development efforts, but there is still a long way to go before women and men around the world have equal economic, social, and political opportunities.

(6) Vulnerability of children and elderly people. The effects of childhood malnutrition last a lifetime, and even into succeeding generations. Malnutrition is a factor in one-third of the 13 million annual deaths of children under five years old. The number of malnourished children under five in the developing world rose from 168 million in 1975 to 184 million in 1990, but fell as a share of all developing-country children from 42 to 34 percent. Vitamin and mineral deficiencies

are less easily noticed, but they can severely retard the growth and mental development of children. The 1990 World Summit for Children pledged to halve malnutrition among children under five by the year 2000. Progress is uneven, but generally encouraging.

Elderly people are disproportionately vulnerable to hunger and malnutrition in both industrial and developing countries. Elderly populations are growing everywhere as people live longer, and with changing lifestyles and family structures, the elderly in many countries are receiving less care from the family. Strategies to care for the increasing number of aged over the next 25 years need to be developed.

Conclusion

The world community has both the knowledge and the resources to eliminate hunger. Putting these tools to work requires us to ground our choices--small and large, individual and collective, political and economic--in ethical values, including empowerment and justice, stewardship of common resources for the common good, and affirmation of diversity.

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"A 2020 Vision for Food, Agriculture, and the Environment" is an initiative of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) to develop a shared vision and consensus for action on how to meet future world food needs while reducing poverty and protecting the environment. Through the 2020 Vision initiative, IFPRI is bringing together divergent schools of thought on these issues, generating research, and identifying recommendations. The *2020 Briefs* present information on various aspects of the issues.