

## **The State of Food Insecurity in the World: News brief from Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) - Rome**

In the developing world, 790 million people do not have enough to eat, according to the most recent estimates (1995/97). That represents a decline of 40 million compared to 1990/92. At the World Food Summit in 1996, world leaders pledged to reduce the number of hungry people to around 400 million by 2015. At the current rate of progress, a reduction of 8 million undernourished people a year, there is no hope of meeting that goal.

According to the state of food insecurity in the World 1999, the current reduction does not indicate uniform progress throughout the world. Indeed the data reveal that, in the first half of this decade, just 37 countries achieved a reduction in the number of undernourished, totalling 100 million people. Across the rest of the developing world, the number of hungry people actually increased by almost 60 million.

The state of food insecurity in the world also points out that hunger is not limited to the developing nations. The report presents the first assessment of the number of undernourished people in the developed world, finding 8 million in the industrialized countries and 26 million in the countries in transition.

There is no single prescription for action to combat hunger. The goal agreed to at the 1999 World Food Summit - a reduction by half in the number of hungry people by the year 2015 - must be translated into concrete objectives at local, national and regional levels. This will enable people and their leaders to take action that will guarantee the birthright of everyone on this planet - enough to eat.

### **Meeting the challenge**

It is clear that there is no single prescription for combating hunger. Policies and strategies must address both the causes and effects of food insecurity in order to build an appropriate framework for concrete action. In societies at peace, poverty and marginalization are the root causes of hunger. Where there is no peace, physical destruction and the displacement of people are additional causes.

Action is needed most urgently in countries where chronic food insecurity is most prevalent or is increasing. These are very poor countries whose populations are predominantly rural and largely dependent on agriculture for a living. They require economic and technical innovations to improve their agricultural productivity as well as specific policies to ensure that food is more affordable for the entire population.

However, these measures alone will not suffice. In a world where 4 400 million people live in developing countries and one-third survive on less than US\$ 1 a day, other basic human needs must be fulfilled. Concerted efforts are required to ensure that everyone has access to health and education services, safe drinking water, basic sanitation facilities and adequate housing.

At the other end of the spectrum, in countries where the percentage of hungry people is already low, the challenge is to find effective ways to benefit the most destitute. These people are usually marginal participants in the mainstream market economy. They can only be reached by carefully targeted poverty alleviation programmes, supported by the judicious use of social safety nets.

In all cases, it is imperative that efforts concentrate on improving the health and nutrition of children. Investments in children are known to produce the highest returns over time in both economic and humanitarian terms. It is often the children in food-insecure households who suffer the most from hunger. The recent improvement seen in Asia is encouraging, but we should also be aware of the deterioration in many African countries where undernutrition of children is increasing.

While the main focus of action must be chronically hungry and vulnerable people, immediate humanitarian assistance is needed for those whose food security and basic livelihood have been affected by unexpected shocks from social, economic or natural disasters, to prevent them from falling into chronic food insecurity.

Until now, individual countries have dealt with these challenges in different ways and some have had more success than others. Now it is important to focus on practical country experiences, to analyse the reasons for the success of some and the failure of others, and to draw lessons from these cases.

As this report emphasizes, many of our estimates, while based on the best available data, are still too imprecise to ensure successful action programmes. In order to better target policies and resources towards the hungry and the most vulnerable members of society, countries and local organizations are encouraged to use the inter-agency Food Insecurity and Vulnerability Information and Mapping Systems (FIVIMS) to improve their own systems for collecting and analysing food security information.

One of the purposes of this, the first edition of *The State of Food Insecurity in the World*, is to encourage greater use of tools such as FIVIMS. This report is also meant to focus the attention of the world's leaders and opinion makers on the problem of undernourishment around the world and to spur development of innovative approaches to tackle it.

We have the tools to achieve the World Food Summit target of halving the number of undernourished globally by 2015. The next step is translating the goal into concrete objectives at the local, national and regional levels where people and their leaders can take action.

In the spirit of the Summit's call for the elimination of food insecurity around the world, it is not enough to meet the numerical target simply as a result of rapid progress in a few very large countries. This would be unfair to those living in

many other countries. They also have the right to be free from the diminished lives and premature death that come from food insecurity.

#### **Factors that bring about change**

Analysis of progress in reducing hunger rarely reveals startling changes from one year to the next. Occasionally a major shock of nature or history - such as a cyclone, economic slump or war - may trigger a food security crisis. But the impact of such events tends to be transitory, reflected in a sharp spike in the numbers that does not alter the long-term trajectory. Reaching the World Food Summit target will require successful efforts to change the long-term trends and to understand the many factors that determine them.

Conditions vary considerably from one place to another and so do the combinations of factors that leave particular population groups vulnerable to poverty and hunger. Usually many different demographic, environmental, economic, social and political elements are involved. In the follow-up to the

World Food Summit, considerable effort has gone into developing effective methods and indicators to monitor these factors. Some preliminary results of this effort are presented in this section by focusing on eight countries that have registered particularly significant changes in prevalence of undernourishment since 1980. Two countries are highlighted from each of the four regions in the developing world - the country where the prevalence of hunger has been reduced most rapidly and the one that has suffered the worst setbacks.

#### **Recent shocks: floods, drought, war and financial collapse threaten progress.**

Cambodia -	reaping the dividends of peace
DPR Korea -	a bitter harvest
Honduras -	economic growth reduces hunger
Cuba -	loss of trading partner erodes food security
Morocco -	thriving economy boosts food security
Afghanistan -	war leaves little ground for crops
Ghana -	economic growth fuels rapid gains
Burundi -	population growth and conflict