

The Facts about World Hunger

by Jim Peron

The headline in the *New York Times* screamed: “World Hunger Increasing, New U.N. Report Finds.” Coming as it did just two days before Thanksgiving, the irony couldn’t be lost on the average reader. The opening paragraph made clear that the situation was dire. “The number of hungry people worldwide swelled in recent years, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, thanks to war, drought, AIDS and trade barriers, according to a report released today by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization” (FAO).¹

What exactly is happening here? Haven’t market liberals been applauding the good news that world hunger is diminishing? Didn’t the left-of-center Bjørn Lomborg make that same point in his book, *The Skeptical Environmentalist*? Have the environmental doomsayers finally been proven right?

The headline was not quite accurate. The FAO report, “The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2003,” covers undernourishment in the developing world only from base years 1990–1992 to 1999–2001. The results can depend on how that time frame is examined. During the full period, the number of undernourished dropped both in raw terms, from 816.6 million to 797.9 million, and in percentage terms, from 20 percent to

17 percent.² But if the period is divided into halves, a slightly different picture emerges. The raw number of undernourished dropped to 779.7 million in the first half, but then increased to 797.9 million in the second. The increase in the second half is less than the decrease in the first half, meaning that over the whole period the raw number still declined by 18.7 million. During that same period, the population of the developing world increased by a massive 662.2 million. Thus within a ten-year period, about 681 million additional people were being fed.³

The choice of base year can also affect how dramatic the decline in hunger will appear. The report uses 1990–92. From then until now the undernourished proportion of the population declined from 20 percent to 17 percent. Had the UN gone back one decade further, the decline would have been more impressive, since in 1980, 28 percent were hungry. While the improvement may have slowed down, we should not overlook that this is still an improvement.

The *Times* reported “that more than 840 million people, or 1 in 7 world-wide, went hungry.” The foreword to the report says: “[A]n estimated 798 million were undernourished in 1999–2001.” Why the discrepancy?

The UN report basically covers the developing world. But in one section it mentions a total world figure of 842 million, which includes 10 million in the industrialized nations and 34 million in transitional

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nations, mainly the former Soviet bloc.⁴ In a sense that 842 million figure is a combination of apples and oranges. Being undernourished in London and being undernourished in rural Tanzania are two different things.

The general improvement in undernourishment rates applies across most of the globe. During the last decade, hunger rates dropped in Asia and the Pacific from 20 to 16 percent and in Latin America and the Caribbean from 13 to 10 percent. Even sub-Saharan Africa's rate dropped from 35 to 33 percent. Only in the Near East and North Africa did rates go up, from 8 to 10 percent. Some of the subregions had rather impressive declines. East Africa saw a decline from 44 to 39 percent; Southern Africa, from 48 to 41 percent; West Africa, from 21 to 15 percent; East Asia, from 20 to 16 percent; and South America, from 14 to 10 percent.⁵

Such large regional drops in hunger rates were ignored by the *Times*. It reported instead: "Only 19 countries, including China, reduced hunger among its people throughout the 1990s." That is simply not true. The real number is far in excess of 19. The reporter apparently misread the report, which says: "In 19 countries, the number of chronically hungry people declined by over 80 million between 1990–1992 and 1999–2001."⁶ The *Times* inserted the word "only," giving the impression that everywhere else hunger increased or stayed the same. The word "only" is not in the report for good reason. The report ignores many countries where hunger is not a problem. (The word "only" did appear in an FAO press release. But the context made clear that this is 19 countries within the developing world only, and it doesn't say they were the only developing nations where the rate improved.)

The report's statistical tables tell a different story from the one the *Times* told. The tables clearly show that of the 90 developing nations, 32 saw a reduction in the total number of undernourished people. In 60 nations, or two-thirds of the developing world, the total number went up, but as a percentage of the population, the rates actually declined.

A Few Bad Places

The problem is that a few spots in the world are suffering badly. As noted, hunger is up from 10 to 14 percent in the Near East;⁷ in Central Africa it was even worse. Hunger rates there went from 35 to 58 percent.⁸ By looking at the nations that saw dramatic shifts in undernourishment rates, either improvements or declines, we can start to pinpoint some of the major causes of world hunger today.

For instance pro-market reforms in China are clearly having benefits. At the beginning of the last decade the number of undernourished there was 193 million. Even though the population increased by 105.5 million, the number of undernourished declined almost 58 million—to a raw total of 135.3 million. The percentage of undernourished dropped from 16 to 11 percent. On the other hand, hard-line socialist North Korea saw the opposite happen. During the base years 18 percent of North Koreans were undernourished, but by the end of the decade, the rate had increased to 34 percent.⁹

In Vietnam, markets were liberalized and the number of undernourished dropped from 27 to 19 percent. In Venezuela a "pro-poor" socialist government took over and the rate of undernourished jumped from 11 to 18 percent.¹⁰

It quickly becomes clear that world hunger today is not caused by a strain on the planet or an inability to produce food, as many environmentalists have contended. Hunger today is primarily a politically induced problem. As FAO director general Jacques Diouf says, "Bluntly stated, the problem is not so much a lack of food as a lack of political will."¹¹

Hunger is routinely caused by bad economic policies or armed political conflict. The cessation of conflict in Angola brought undernourishment rates down from 61 to 49 percent. In Mozambique the end of the civil war saw a decline from 69 to 53 percent. In contrast, the continuing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo increased the rate from 31 to 75 percent.¹² The FAO report noted: "Eight countries suffered

[food] emergencies during 15 or more years during 1986–2003. War or civil strife was a major factor in all eight.”¹³

Undernourishment figures for the Near East, another region where hunger increased, show a similar pattern. For the region as a whole the UN says the rate increased from 10 to 14 percent. But if you exclude Iraq and Afghanistan, the rate would have hardly changed—from around 6 percent to 6.5 percent.¹⁴

Economic Growth Is Key

A key factor in reducing hunger is economic growth. The report notes: “In countries that succeeded in reducing hunger throughout the nine-year period, GDP per capita grew at an annual rate of 2.6 percent—more than five times higher than the rate in countries where undernourishment increased in both subperiods (0.5 percent).”¹⁵ If, as the report notes, strong economic growth is associated with a reduction in hunger, then globalization is critical to ending world hunger. A World Bank report has stated that “the more globalized developing countries have increased their per capita growth rate from 1 percent in the 1960s, to 3 percent in the 1970s, 4 percent in the 1980s, and 5 percent in the 1990s. Their growth rates now substantially exceed those of the rich countries.”¹⁶ The FAO report acknowledges this: “Overall, countries that are more involved in trade tend to enjoy higher rates of economic growth.”¹⁷

This doesn't mean that nature has no role to play. Many food-insecure countries are still plagued by periodic droughts and/or flooding, which limits their ability to grow food. On the other hand, even these problems are exacerbated by local cultural and/or economic policies. Many African countries promote subsistence farming in the belief that a nation of farmers will never go hun-

gry. But only a nation of farmers can starve to death since during natural disasters they have nothing to trade for food. The FAO report verifies this indirectly: “Throughout the developing world, agriculture accounts for around 9 percent of GDP and more than half of total employment. But its relative importance is far greater in those countries where hunger is most widespread. In countries where more than 34 percent of the population are undernourished, agriculture represents 30 percent of GDP, and nearly 70 percent of the people rely on agriculture for their livelihoods.”¹⁸

Today the West gets blamed for protectionist agricultural policies that keep out imports from the Third World. A change in such policies is needed immediately. But change will help only those Third World countries that have liberalized their domestic markets. Generally speaking, the nations that have liberalized are not the ones still suffering high rates of hunger. The nations that are starving are mainly the victims of local politics and internal warfare. The planet can well feed the numbers we have now and many, many more. The problem isn't unsustainable development or an inability to produce. It's a problem of getting governments out of the way. □

1. Somini Sengupta, “World Hunger Increasing, New U.N. Report Finds,” *New York Times*, November 25, 2003; <http://college3.nytimes.com/guests/articles/2003/11/25/1126810.xml>.

2. Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, “The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2003,” p. 31; www.fao.org/docrep/006/j0083e/j0083e00.htm.

3. Calculations based on tables in *ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Based on table in *ibid.*, p. 34.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

14. Based on tables in *ibid.*, p. 32.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

16. World Bank, *Globalization, Growth, and Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 5.

17. “The State of Food Insecurity,” p. 16.

18. *Ibid.*

Key facts about global hunger today. Around the world, more than enough food is produced to feed the global population—but more than 820 million people go hungry each year.[4] After steadily declining for a decade, world hunger is on the rise, affecting 11 percent of people globally. There were an estimated 775 million undernourished people in 2014—a record low - but that number increased to 820 million in 2018.5. Before this increase in recent years, the world had been making significant progress in reducing hunger. In fact, in 2000, world leaders joined the United Nations and civil society The 11 facts you want are below, and the sources for the facts are at the very bottom of the page. After you learn something, Do Something! Find out how to take action here. 11.3% of the world’s population is hungry. That’s roughly 805 million people who go undernourished on a daily basis, consuming less than the recommended 2,100 calories a day.[1]. The world produces enough food to feed all 7 billion people, but those who go hungry either do not have land to grow food or money to purchase it. Fight hunger in your community by collecting food outside a local supermarket. Sign up for Supermark On World Hunger Day, celebrated on May 28th every year, we will shine the light of some major facts about hunger that has its tentacles spread worldwide. 1. 11% of people are hungry worldwide, despite producing surplus food. Though the world collectively produces enough and more food to feed the global population, over 820 million people suffer from hunger each year. There was a steady decline in this figure for a decade, but the slant of world hunger is moving upward, affecting around 11 percent of the people worldwide. The estimated low record of 775 million undernourished in 2014, had swell