

FOOD SECURITY

More and more people are going hungry

Some countries have made progress, but others, those in the most critical situation, are clearly losing ground and the gap between the countries that are better off and the poorest is widening. In the countries in worse situation an average of 35% of the population are undernourished, while in the countries in better situation the figure is no more than 7%. Since 1997 the number of people who are undernourished has risen, and the regions that are affected most are sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia.

Social Watch Research Team¹

Selected indicators:

- Undernourishment (% of total population)
- Underweight at birth (%)
- Malnutrition among children under 5, low weight (%)

Food security is one of the most critical dimensions of community development and one of the basic human rights established in the ICESCR. It features in declarations and proposed objectives in countries, in regions, and on the international stage.

However, the reality is that effective achievements in this area fall a long way short of governments' declared intentions. At the present time there are an estimated 842 million people in the world who are undernourished out of a total world population of 6 billion, and the trend in the last 10 years has been most discouraging.² In at least 35 countries more than a quarter of the people are undernourished,³ and in some cases the figures are simply shocking: in Burundi, the Republic of the Congo and Eritrea, three fifths of the population are undernourished.

According to UNICEF, in the developing countries one quarter of the children under 5 suffer from malnutrition,⁴ which amounts to a total of 146 mil-

lion children.⁵ The statistics show that the situation in 31 countries is even worse, and in Bangladesh and Nepal, for example, half the children in the country show signs of malnutrition.

Food insufficiency is also perpetuated through maternity. Every year more than 20 million children (15.5% of all live births) come into the world weighing less than 2,500 grams (5.5 pounds).⁶ They are underweight mainly because their mothers were undernourished during pregnancy. In 16 of the countries analyzed at least 20% of babies are underweight at birth, and in Bangladesh, India, Sudan and Yemen the figure is over 30%.

The huge gap between the countries in the better and worse situations as regards food security is just one more sign of how important this aspect of development is. In addition, it should be borne in mind that there are no statistics available for many developed countries, so the differences that the indicators show underestimate the real gap.

In the countries that are worse off an average of 35% of the people are undernourished, while only 7% of the people in the countries that are better off are affected.

When it comes to children the situation is no better. In the countries that are in the worse position an average of 30% of children under 5 are undernourished, but in the better group the figure is less than 7%. On average, 15% of children are born underweight in the worse-off countries, but only 7.5% are underweight at birth in the countries at the other end of the scale.

In many communities the problems of food insecurity are accentuated when extreme situations give rise to food emergencies. Food crises are associated not only with natural disasters but also with direct human causes like armed conflicts, economic crises and forced population displacement, and these have increased dramatically in the last 10

The right to adequate food is enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). When States sign this Covenant they commit themselves to working to improve their methods of food production, conservation and distribution, and to ensure the equitable distribution of food in the world according to people's needs. ■

years. The consequences are much worse in poor countries, and very much worse indeed among the most vulnerable communities and population groups, above all in rural areas where the impact is usually more direct and cruel.

However, food insecurity is a global problem whose causes go far beyond natural disasters or armed conflicts.

Food security is linked to other aspects of development in that it is of crucial importance for people in a community to be able to attain a decent level of life.

The latest Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) report gives an analysis based on studies and examples of the numerous mechanisms that link food security to the other aspects of development (see boxes). The aim is to show that it is inconsistent to consider development targets, and in particular the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), in isolation from one another, and the report concludes that if these goals are to be reached it is essential to see them as necessarily interconnected and tackle them as an integrated whole. If this interconnection is evident in a series of specific and limited goals like the MDGs it is more consistent to talk of human rights to understand why they should be seen as an integrated whole.

The human rights focus shows how essential the ideas of unity and interdependence are not only in the legal sphere but also as a consequence of the very nature of the processes involved. In a community, not being able to exercise one of these rights, or having one violated, has an effect on all the other rights.

It is not possible to talk about the right to food outside the framework of the wider concept of food sovereignty, which has to do with a country's or a community's capacity to feed itself through autonomous

1 The members of the Social Watch Social Sciences Research Team are listed in the credits at the start of this book.

2 FAO (2005). *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2005*. Available from: <www.fao.org/docrep/008/a0200e/a0200e00.htm>.

3 Undernourishment: the percentage of the population who consume less than the required minimum of food energy. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) the essential daily minimum, which takes account of calories needed to maintain body weight while performing a light activity, varies in different countries but is approximately 2,300 kcal per capita, depending on age, sex and stature.

4 Infant malnutrition: the percentage of children under 5 whose weight by age is less than minus 2 of the standard deviation of the mean for the international reference population of ages from 0 to 59 months. The reference population adopted by WHO in 1983 is based on children in the United States of America, who are assumed to be well fed.

5 UNICEF (2006). "Progress for Children. A Report Card on Malnutrition". No. 4, May.

6 Low birth weight has been defined by WHO as weight at birth of less than 2,500 grams (5.5 pounds). This practical cut-off point for international comparison is based on epidemiological observations that infants weighing less than 2,500 g are approximately 20 times more likely to die than heavier babies. A birth weight below 2,500 g is more common in developing than in developed countries, and it contributes to a range of poor health conditions. UNICEF and WHO (2004). *Low Birthweight: Country, regional and global estimates*.

control of the food production process. Therefore food sovereignty has to do with the rights of communities, countries or groups of countries to define their agrarian policies in a way that excludes dumping (an unethical strategy in normal international trade transactions whereby a product is placed on the market in another country at a price below its value in the country of origin). This includes, for example, policies of making land and credit available to small farmers, but it also includes international trade regulations. The international trade system currently in operation systematically perpetuates inequalities between rich and poor countries by the use of tariff and non-tariff barriers and by subsidizing production in rich countries.

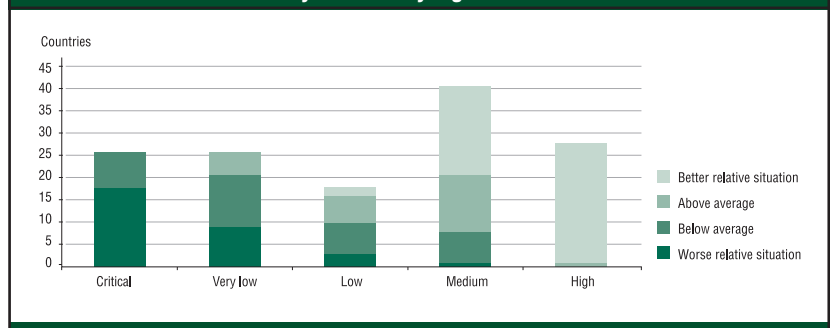
It is no surprise that the countries that are worse off as regards food security are also those that are in difficulties in the other areas of development, as can be seen in accordance with their ranking in the Basic Capabilities Index (BCI).⁷

All the countries in a critical situation in the BCI ratings are also below average in food security, and of the 26 countries in this group 18 are in the worse situation.

In the group of critical BCI countries, 17% of babies are underweight at birth, at least 33% of children under 5 have malnutrition-related problems, and on average 32.5% of the people are undernourished. In the countries that rate high on the BCI, on the other hand, only 7% of babies are born underweight, only 6% of children suffer from malnutrition and a mere 6% of the population are undernourished.

The problems of food insecurity are clearly more serious in some geographical areas than in others. The two regions where a higher proportion of countries are in severe difficulties in this respect

CHART 1. Current food security situation by regions



Food security and gender equity

In Southern Asia infant malnutrition is even more serious than in sub-Saharan Africa.

Lack of food affects women more than men. "Extreme gender inequalities mean that women in Southern Asia are deprived of education, employment opportunities and participation in decision-making. As a consequence, millions of mothers in the south of Asia 'do not have the knowledge, the means or the freedom to take action for their own benefit or for that of their children'. They are very much more likely to suffer from malnutrition. In some parts of Southern Asia the men and boys consume twice the calories that women and girls consume, but the women and girls do a lot of the heavy work."¹⁰

are sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia. More than half the undernourished children in the world are in Southeast Asia, and 57 million live in India.¹¹

According to the latest FAO evaluation, some progress has been made in reducing hunger in the world. Between 1990 and 2002 the number of undernourished people in the developing countries fell by 9 million.¹²

Nevertheless, this global figure conceals enormous differences between regions and countries. In East Asia the figure fell by 47 million over the period, mainly thanks to improvements in China, but in sub-Saharan Africa there are 34 million more undernourished people than there were at the start of the 1990s.

In fact, the number of people on the planet who suffer from hunger has risen since 1997.

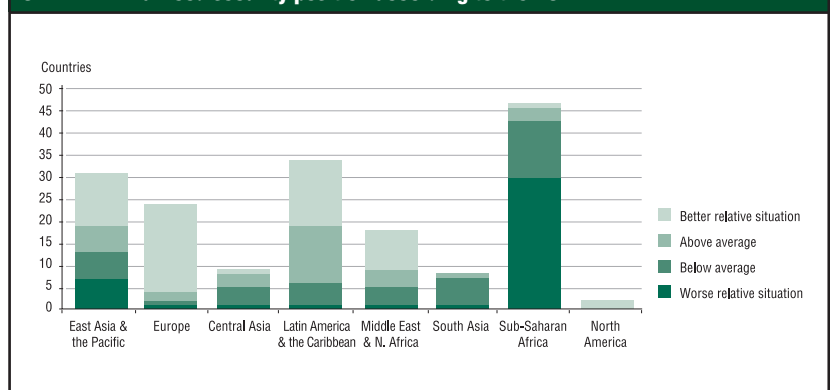
At the current pace, we will fall a long way short of the objective to reduce by half the number of people suffering from hunger by 2015, adopted at the FAO World Food Summit in 1996 and renewed in the MDGs in 2000.

Food security and children's health

Hunger and malnutrition are the main causes of more than half of total infant deaths. Each year they kill nearly 6 million children.⁸

Many babies who are born underweight do not survive because of inadequate food. At least 5.6 million children under 5 die each year as a consequence of malnutrition, which is responsible for more than half of mortality in children under 5 years old.⁹

CHART 2. Final food security position according to the BCI



7 See the section entitled "Achievement of basic capabilities is an indispensable task for development" in this Report.

8 FAO (2005), *op cit*.

9 UNICEF and WHO (2004), *op cit*.

11 UNICEF (2006), *op cit*.

12 United Nations (2006). *The Millennium Development Goals Report*. <mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Products/Progress2006/MDGReport2006.pdf>.

10 FAO (2005), *op cit*.

TABLE 1. Current situation by food security evolution

	SIGNIFICANT REGRESSION	SLIGHT REGRESSION	STAGNATION	SLIGHT PROGRESS	SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS	TOTAL
Countries in worse situation	3	5	5	9	8	30
Countries below the average	0	3	4	11	8	26
Countries above the average	1	2	6	10	2	21
Countries in better situation	0	1	7	6	0	14
Total	4	11	22	36	18	91

TABLE 2. Averages by indicator of countries in better and worse relative food security situations

		UNDERNOURISHED (% OF TOTAL POPULATION)	LOW BIRTH WEIGHT (%)	MALNUTRITION AMONG CHILDREN UNDER 5, LOW WEIGHT (%)
Countries in worse situation	Average	34.9	15.4	30.2
	Number of countries	30	37	30
Countries in better situation	Average	6.8	7.5	7.9
	Number of countries	12	51	13
Total	Average	26.9	10.8	23.5
	Number of countries	42	88	43

Social Watch has analyzed the evolution of food security using data by country from two of the relevant indicators (undernourishment and infant malnutrition), and the conclusions are alarming. Although some countries have made progress others are losing ground, and these are mainly countries in the most critical situation. This means the gap between the better-positioned countries and the worst affected is widening.

There are four countries in particular for which information is available that show marked regression in their food security situation, and this is mainly due to the fact that the number of people who are undernourished has shot up. The most serious cases are the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi, where in just a decade the proportion of the population who were undernourished went from 32% and 48% respectively, to a situation where 70% of the people in these countries were suffering from hunger at the start of the new millennium. In both these cases food insecurity has been exacerbated by climate factors and by armed conflicts whose dire consequences have lingered on long after the events themselves passed into history. Peace is currently being restored in Burundi.

Another case is the Democratic Republic of Korea, where the proportion of people who are undernourished doubled in this period from 18% to 36%. ■

The most critical situations at the present time:

At least one person in two suffers from hunger (*) in ...	
Eritrea	73
Congo, Dem. Rep. of	71
Burundi	68
Sierra Leone	50
Zambia	49
* Undernourishment (% of total population)	

3 out of every 10 newborn babies are significantly under normal weight (*) in...	
Bangladesh	36
Yemen	32
Sudan	31
India	30
* Low weight at birth (%)	

Nearly 50% of children under 5 suffer from malnutrition (*) in...	
Bangladesh	52
Nepal	48
Ethiopia	47
India	47
Yemen	46
Burundi	45
Cambodia	45
* Malnutrition in children under 5, low weight	