Chronic Hunger Falling, But One in Nine People Still Affected
Gaelle Gourmelon | December 1, 2014

Although the proportion of people experiencing chronic hunger is decreasing globally, one in nine individuals still does not get enough to eat.¹ The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 805 million people were living with undernourishment (chronic hunger) in 2012–14, down more than 100 million over the last decade and 209 million lower than in 1990–92.² (See Figure 1.) The vast majority of undernourished people live in developing countries, where an estimated 791 million people—or one in eight—were chronically hungry in 2012–14.³

Undernourishment is defined as an inability to take in enough calories over at least one year to meet dietary energy requirements.⁴ It can lead to undernutrition, a broader term that describes a condition caused by a deficient or imbalanced diet or by poor absorption and biological use of nutrients within the body.⁵ Undernutrition can in turn lead to impaired physical functions and has high social and economic impacts, with the combined cost of undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies equivalent to $1.4–2.1 trillion per year, or 2–3 percent of gross world product.⁶

Figure 1. Number of people undernourished, 1990-1992 to 2012-2014
Women and children are particularly vulnerable to nutritional deficiencies due to biological and social inequities. Women's low educational levels, unequal social status, and limited decisionmaking power can influence both their own nutritional status and that of their children. An undernourished mother is more likely to give birth to a low birth weight baby, causing an intergenerational cycle of poverty and undernutrition. Undernourished children are at higher risk of death from infectious diseases (like diarrhea and pneumonia) and can experience devastating physical, social, and economic consequences into adulthood. Globally, undernutrition contributes to more than one third of child deaths.

The hunger target of Millennium Development Goal 1c (MDG-1c)—to halve the proportion of the population in developing countries who are hungry from the 1990 base year to the 2015 target year—is within reach. Since 1990–92, the prevalence of chronic hunger fell from 18.7 percent to 11.3 percent in 2012–14, less than 2 percent above the MDG-1c target. With 805 million people undernourished in 2012–14, however, the world is not on track to reach the more ambitious 1996 World Food Summit target, which aimed to reduce the actual number of hungry people to 412 million by 2015 (from the 1996 baseline of 824 million).

While there is global progress in reducing hunger, stark disparities exist between and within regions. Many countries and some regions have made little or no progress.

Latin America and the Caribbean has shown the greatest reduction in undernourishment and has already achieved the MDG-1c target. Since the early 1990s, the prevalence of chronic hunger in this region fell by almost two thirds. Haiti, with nearly half of its people undernourished, faces the largest burden in the region.

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Oceania had one of the lowest levels of chronic hunger at the beginning of the 1990s. However, the prevalence has fallen only 1.7 percentage points over the last two decades, leaving a higher share of the population undernourished in 2012–14 than in any other region except Africa.16

Northern Africa has consistently had a prevalence of undernourishment of less than 5 percent.17 But the sub-Saharan region has by far the highest prevalence of any region. While the prevalence there has declined from 33.3 percent in 1990–92, one in four people is still chronically hungry.18 Nearly half of the people in Zambia were undernourished in 2012–14.19

Asia as a whole is close to reaching the MDG-1c, with the prevalence of undernourishment decreasing from 23.7 percent in 1990–92 to 12.7 percent in 2012–14.20 Yet because of Asia’s large population, two out of three undernourished people in the world (526 million people) live in this region.21 In West Asia, the prevalence of chronic hunger actually increased from 6.3 percent in 1990–92 to 8.7 percent in 2012–14 due to political and economic instability.22

Beyond looking at the prevalence of undernourishment, several measures of food security can point to underlying causes of undernutrition more broadly. The World Food Summit measures four dimensions of food security: availability, access, stability, and utilization.23 Availability encompasses the quantity, quality, and diversity of food. Access means physical and economic access. Stability covers food security risks, like dependence on irrigation or food imports, and the incidence of shocks, such as fluctuations in domestic food supply or political instability. Utilization addresses the physiological ability to absorb and use food in the body; sanitation and health care are major contributors to this dimension.

Climate change is presenting an unprecedented challenge to all these dimensions due to disruptions in supply chains, increases in market prices, decreased assets and livelihood opportunities, lower purchasing power, and threats to human health.24 The market sensitivity to climate change was highlighted recently by several periods of rapid increases in food prices following climate extremes, like heat waves, droughts, floods, cyclones, and wildfires, in key producing regions.25 Food insecurity and the breakdown of food systems due to climate change particularly affect poorer populations.26

Because poverty is the main determinant of hunger, access to food is determined by incomes, food prices, and the ability to get social support.27 Food prices have been fluctuating greatly, although generally rising since the late 1990s.28 World food prices have begun to come down since the all-time peak in August 2012, but they remain high (see Figure 3), and poor households still spend a significant portion of their incomes on food.29

Due to income growth and poverty reduction in many countries, some progress on food access has been made over the last two decades.30 Globally, food availability has also improved, with per capita food supply increasing from 2,200 kilocalories (kcal) per day in the early 1960s to more than 2,800 kcal by 2009.31 Large challenges remain in food utilization and in stability due to food price fluctuations and

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natural and human-made crises. However, progress on addressing the various driving factors of food insecurity is uneven across developing regions.

In Latin America, economic growth, political stability, and agricultural and economic incentives have helped the region reach its hunger reduction target. Utilization of food has improved thanks in part to better access to improved water sources and sanitation facilities. In countries with social protection, such as safety nets, access to food has improved. Governments like Brazil have coordinated an array of policies with strong engagement from civil society, cutting undernourishment from 10.7 percent to less than 5 percent between 2000–02 and 2004–06. The Caribbean, however, faces low stability of food security due to the heavy reliance on international food markets, low domestic food access, and limited natural resources.

In sub-Saharan Africa, in contrast, high poverty rates, deteriorating rural infrastructure, and slow income growth mean food availability and distributional access remain low, leaving the region to struggle with the greatest food security challenge. Inadequate safe drinking water and sanitation facilities have limited people’s ability to absorb and use the food that is available. As populations are displaced due to violence in the Central African Republic and Nigeria, increases in demand in certain areas of Chad and Niger have affected cereal prices there. And in 2014, certain areas of West Africa experienced restricted trade flows and market disruptions due to the Ebola Virus Disease outbreak. The effects of Ebola on food prices are not yet clear in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, the most affected countries.

Access to food has improved significantly in East and Southeast Asia. China, Indonesia, Thailand, and Viet Nam have experienced rapid economic growth over the last 30 years, leading to greater investment in agriculture, more food availability, and better access to food. In South Asia, however, social protection programs have not been enough to extend the benefits of regional economic growth to the poor. In West Asia, political and economic instability, mainly due to conflict in Iraq (where the proportion chronically hungry rose dramatically from 7.9 percent in 1990–92 to 23.5 percent in 2012–14) and Syria, have contributed to an increase in the prevalence of hunger.
Food aid programs peaked in 2000–01. The 1999 Food Aid Convention (FAC), a multilateral donor cooperation treaty that aimed to contribute to world food security, saw a drastic drop in annual food aid shipments from 10.5 million wheat ton equivalents in 2000–01 to 5.7 million wheat ton equivalents in 2011–12. The United States provided the majority of international food aid, supplying 56 percent of food aid shipments from 1995–96 to 2011–12.

The Food Assistance Convention, which replaced the expired FAC in 2013, includes not only commodities (like food and seeds) but also cash-based assistance. Thanks to growing recognition that local and regionally purchased food aid is often faster and cheaper, the new treaty stresses that assistance should not require recipients to purchase food from the donor country. The new treaty does, however, make the levels of assistance and the impact of international food price volatility more unpredictable. Unlike the 1999 treaty, the Food Assistance Convention does not establish minimum annual food commitments from donors. Instead, members now announce their commitment levels each year. The new treaty allows donors to express their commitments in terms of quantity of food or in value in the currency of their choice, making assistance vulnerable to international food price volatility. The impacts of the Food Assistance Convention remain to be seen.

The fundamental human right to food, which is codified by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, must be protected through social, economic, and political policies on food and health. Through investments, sound policymaking, strong legal frameworks, stakeholder involvement, and evidence-based decisionmaking, the food security and nutrition environment can be improved to eradicate hunger worldwide.

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Commodity Prices Kept Slowing in 2013 but Still Strong Overall

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