

Global hunger declining, but still unacceptably high

International hunger targets difficult to reach

At close to one billion, the number of undernourished people in the world remains unacceptably high in 2010 despite an expected decline - the first in 15 years. This decline is largely attributable to a more favourable economic environment in 2010 - particularly in developing countries - and the fall in both international and domestic food prices since 2008. The recent increase in food prices, if it persists, will create additional obstacles in the fight to further reduce hunger.

FAO estimates that a total of 925 million people are undernourished in 2010 compared with 1.023 billion in 2009. That is higher than before the food and economic crises of 2008-2009 and higher than the level that existed when world leaders agreed to reduce the number of hungry by half at the World Food Summit in 1996 (Figure 1).

Most of the world's hungry live in developing countries, where they account for 16 percent of the population. While this figure marks an improvement compared to 2009, it is still well above the target set by the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 1 of halving the proportion of undernourished people in developing countries from 20 percent in 1990-92 to 10 percent in 2015 (Figure 2).

- The number of hungry has declined, but remains unacceptably high
- Despite the decline, the ability to achieve international hunger targets such as MDG1 is still at risk
- Governments should encourage increased investment in agriculture, expand safety nets, and enhance income-generating activities for the rural and urban poor.

Better access is key

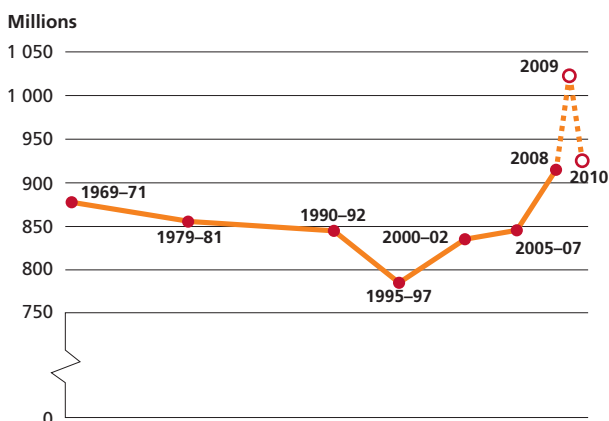
Global cereal harvests have been strong for the past several years, even as the number of undernourished people was rising. The overall improvement in food security in 2010 is thus primarily a result of better access to food due to the improvement in economic conditions, particularly in developing countries, combined with lower food prices.

The International Monetary Fund estimates that world economic output will increase by 4.2 percent in 2010, faster than previously expected, following a contraction of 0.6 percent in 2009. In general, income is growing faster in emerging economies and developing countries than it is in developed countries. The World Bank estimates that private capital inflows to developing countries are also increasing faster than originally expected.

In parallel, international and domestic cereal prices have declined from their 2008 peaks, reflecting two consecutive years of record yields. While production

FIGURE 1

Number of undernourished people in the world, 1969-71 to 2010

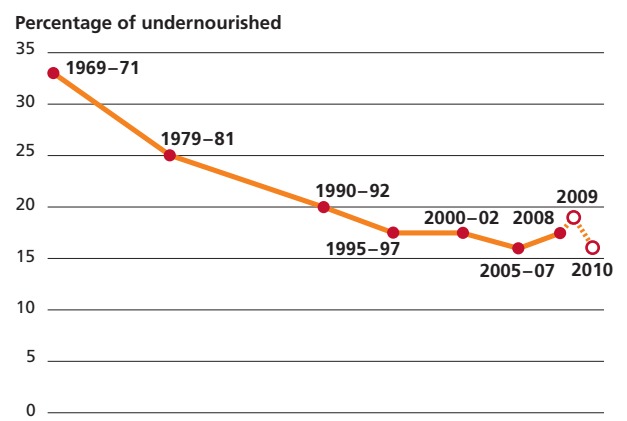


Note: Figures for 2009 and 2010 are estimated by FAO with input from the United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Source: FAO.

FIGURE 2

Proportion of undernourished people in developing countries, 1969-71 to 2010



Source: FAO.

in 2010 is forecast to be lower, the overall supply situation is considered as adequate. However, food prices in most low-income food-deficit countries remain above the pre-crisis level, negatively affecting access to food by vulnerable populations.

Insufficient resilience to economic shocks

The analysis of hunger during crisis and recovery brings to the fore the insufficient resilience to economic shocks of many poor countries and households. Lack of appropriate mechanisms to deal with the shocks or to protect the most vulnerable populations from their effects result in large swings in hunger following crises.

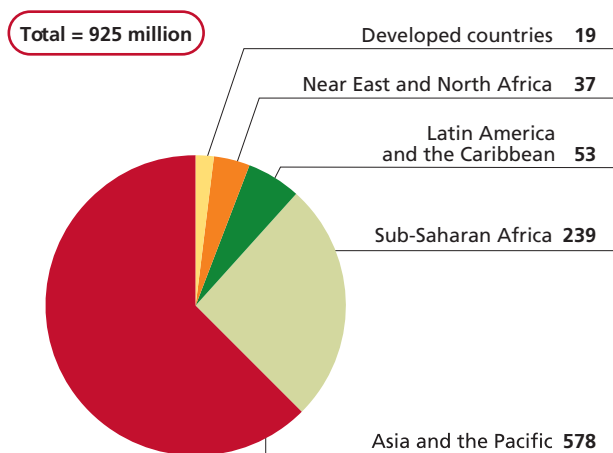
Moreover, it should not be assumed that all the effects of crises on hunger disappear when the crisis is over. Vulnerable households may deal with shocks by selling assets, which are very difficult to rebuild, by reducing food consumption in terms of quantity and variety, and by cutting down on health and education expenditures - coping mechanisms that all have long-term negative effects on the quality of life and livelihoods.

Undernourishment by region

Developing countries account for 98 percent of the world's undernourished people. Two-thirds live in just seven countries (Bangladesh, China, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia and Pakistan) and over 40 percent live in China and India alone.

FIGURE 3

Undernourishment in 2010, by region (millions)



Note: All figures are rounded.

Source: FAO.

Estimates for 2010 indicate that the number of undernourished people will decline in all developing regions, although with a different pace. The region with most undernourished people continues to be Asia and the Pacific, but with a 12 percent decline from 658 million in 2009 to 578 million, this region also accounts for most of the global improvement expected in 2010. The proportion of undernourished people remains highest in sub-Saharan Africa, at 30 percent in 2010 (Figure 3).

MDG 1 difficult to reach

Latest available statistics indicate that some progress has been made towards achieving MDG 1, with the prevalence of hunger declining from 20 percent undernourished in 1990-92 to 16 percent in 2010. However, with the world's population still increasing (albeit more slowly than in recent decades), a declining proportion of people who are hungry can mask an increase in the number. In fact, developing countries as a group have seen an overall setback in terms of the number of hungry people (from 827 million in 1990-92 to 906 million in 2010).

As of 2005-07 (the most recent period for which complete data are available), the Congo, Ghana, Mali and Nigeria had already achieved MDG 1 in sub-Saharan Africa, and Ethiopia and others were close to doing so. In Asia, Armenia, Myanmar and Viet Nam had achieved the target reduction and others were coming close, including China. In Latin America and the Caribbean, Guyana, Jamaica and Nicaragua had succeeded in reducing the prevalence of hunger by half and Brazil, among others, was approaching this objective.

The fact that nearly a billion people remain hungry even after the recent food and financial crises have largely passed indicates a deeper structural problem that gravely threatens the ability to achieve internationally agreed goals on hunger reduction. In order to tackle the root causes of hunger, governments should encourage increased investment in agriculture, expand safety nets and social assistance programmes, and enhance income-generating activities for the rural and urban poor.

Further information

- **The State of Food Insecurity in the World: Addressing food security in protracted crises.** FAO/WFP (to be released in October 2010).
- **FAO Hunger Portal:** www.fao.org/hunger.