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HUNGER: CAUSES, EXTENT, AND SEVERITY

Frequently Asked Questions

How many people in the world are suffering from hunger?

The United Nations estimates that around 690 million out of 7.5 billion people worldwide went hungry in 2019. That makes up over nine percent of the global population, or every eleventh person. Another three billion people cannot afford healthy food and are not always sure how they will find enough to eat for the day.

The figure of 690 million undernourished people is a corrected total for 2019, which was produced in July 2020 when key data for China and other populous countries were updated. The latest UN global nutrition report is based on these corrected figures. In any case, an analysis of all data since 2000 confirms that the number of chronically undernourished people has been gradually trending upward since 2014; before that, it had been steadily receding.

Where are people going hungry?

(Figures are based on 2019 values provided in the UN Food and Agricultural Organization's report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020 also known as SOFI 2020)

While Asia has the highest number of people in the world currently suffering from hunger, at 381 million, the level of hunger in Africa is also alarming. This is especially true of eastern Africa, where about one fifth of the population is undernourished (19.1 percent). Overall, 250 million people throughout the African continent are going hungry, as are 48 million people in Latin America.

Why do people go hungry?

The reasons are complex, ranging from wars, crises, and natural disasters through poor governance, unjust distribution of land, and social exclusion to climate change, financial crises, and unfair international trade agreements. Another factor affecting hunger is insufficient resilience to crises and disasters. Efforts to strengthen the resilience of systems are urgently needed, so that people do not have to go hungry during droughts, famines, and natural disasters. Better food security is vital for achieving greater resilience.

Natural resources are becoming increasingly scarce, meaning that reforms in how resources are managed are desperately needed in order to ensure food security. This involves lifestyle changes—especially within countries and strata of society that are more wealthy—accompanied by the requisite policy adjustments and the targeted use of innovative technologies.

The global coronavirus epidemic is also causing poorer members of society, in particular, to lose their sources of income, thereby worsening their nutrition situation. This is particularly relevant in developing countries that lack social security systems and cannot offer financial bailouts.

How many children suffer from hunger?

Around 191 million children under five years of age are underdeveloped due to malnutrition. That amounts to between one quarter and one third of all children in this age group. In 2019, one in every five of these 191 million children was stunted, i.e. too small for his or her age. Stunting counts as evidence of chronic undernourishment.

47 million of these children suffered from wasting, meaning that they also weighed too little for their size, which is recognised as an indicator of acute undernourishment.

At the same time, around 38 million children throughout the world under five years of age were overweight.

How many children die from hunger worldwide?

The United Nations estimates that around 5.3 million children under five years of age die every year (UNICEF, 2018); nearly half of these deaths can be traced back to malnutrition and undernutrition.

Does the world produce enough food to feed everyone?

In principle, yes, if distribution were fair. However, according to estimates from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), agricultural production would have to be increased by more than 70 percent by 2050 to meet the rising global demand for food.

How much should everyone eat per day?

The minimum required amount of food per person per day varies by country, age, and sex. Two common benchmarks are 1,800 kilocalories (according to FAO) and 2,100 kilocalories (according to the World Health Organization).

What constitutes a famine?

The United Nations lists five levels of food security for any given country. Famine is the fifth and worst level. For a famine to be declared, the following three conditions must be met:

1. At least 20 percent of households in an area face extreme food shortages with a limited ability to cope (fewer than 2,100 kilocalories available per day).
2. At least 30 percent of the population is acutely malnourished.
3. Every day, at least two out of every 10,000 people or four out of every 10,000 children die from a lack of food.

What, exactly, is hunger?

The definition of hunger is as multi-faceted as the various causes and degrees of hunger.

Colloquially, hunger is used as a term to describe the suffering caused by a lack of calories. However, this definition falls short because hunger has various causes and takes numerous forms, as explained hereafter.

Chronic Hunger

Chronic hunger describes a constant or regular state of undernourishment. Undernourishment can be both qualitative and quantitative. Globally, this is the most common form of hunger and is often closely linked to poverty. It is frequently not visible at first glance but has drastic effects: The body offsets nutritional shortfalls by limiting physical and cognitive activity, which robs people of their initiative and concentration, rendering them apathetic; in children, this can cause irreversible damage to their cognitive and physical development.

A Form of Chronic Hunger: Hidden Hunger

This type of undernourishment results from vitamins and minerals (such as zinc, iodine, and iron) being absorbed and utilised in quantities that are too small to ensure stable health and development. As it is not immediately identifiable, this is the most difficult form of hunger to detect. It affects around two billion people worldwide. After disaster situations, poverty is the primary cause of hidden hunger. A lack of nutrients can have severe and long-lasting effects: physical disabilities, a weaker immune system, limitations in cognitive development, and higher death rates among mothers and children. Hidden hunger leads to undernourishment. In addition to harming individuals, it can also impair the entire socio-economic development of affected countries. Productivity falls because people are denied the chance to mature in a healthy way and because the cycle of poverty becomes entrenched.

Acute Hunger

This involves severe undernourishment over a limited period of time. It is the most extreme form of hunger and is often caused by natural disasters. Around eight percent of people going hungry in the world suffer from acute hunger.

Every person should have access to culturally appropriate food in sufficient quantities and of sufficient quality to meet their nutritional needs.

Sources and further information:

- Global Hunger Index 2019 <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/>
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