

Hunger and Malnutrition

The number of people affected by hunger has been slowly increasing since 2014. According to the most recent estimates, around 690 million people suffer from hunger (about 8.9% of the world population). Most of the malnourished population is found in Asia (381 million people), followed by the African continent with more than 250 million people, this being the region with the highest increase in cases.

Malnutrition in all its forms remains a challenge today. In 2019, 144 million (21.3%) of children under 5 years of age are stunted,

6.9% (47 million) is wasted and 5.6% (38.3 million) are overweight.

But what is hunger?

According to Global Hunger Index, the problem of hunger is complex, and has different concepts related:

Hunger is usually understood to refer to the distress associated with a lack of sufficient calories. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) defines food deprivation, or undernourishment, as the consumption of too few calories to provide the minimum amount of dietary energy that each individual requires to live a healthy and productive life, given that person's sex, age, stature, and physical activity level.

Undernutrition goes beyond calories and signifies deficiencies in any or all of the following: energy, protein, and/ or essential vitamins and minerals. Undernutrition is the result of inadequate intake of food in terms of either quantity or quality, poor utilization of nutrients due to infections or other illnesses, or a combination of these factors. These, in turn, are caused by a range of factors, including household food insecurity; inadequate maternal health or childcare practices; or inadequate access to health services, safe water, and sanitation.

Malnutrition refers more broadly to both undernutrition (problems caused by deficiencies) and overnutrition (problems caused by unbalanced diets, such as consuming too many calories in relation to requirements with or without low intake of micronutrient-rich foods).

How can we measure hunger?

In the global hunger index there are four indicators used to measure hunger:

1. **Undernourishment:** the share of the population that is undernourished (that is, whose caloric intake is insufficient);

2. **Child Wasting:** the share of children under the age of five who are wasted (that is, who have low weight for their height, reflecting acute undernutrition);
3. **Child Stunting:** the share of children under the age of five who are stunted (that is, who have low height for their age, reflecting chronic undernutrition); and
4. **Child Mortality:** the mortality rate of children under the age of five (in part, a reflection of the fatal mix of inadequate nutrition and unhealthy environments).

The map of figure 1 shows the Global Hunger Index by severity level worldwide.

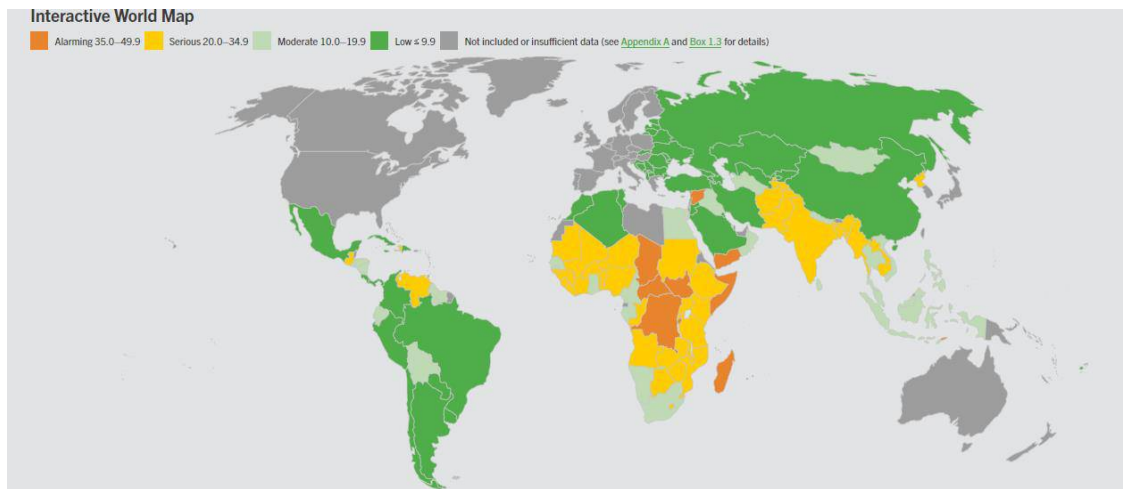


Figure 1 – 2020 Global Hunger Index by Severity Level

Food Security

Food security is a term that refers to regular access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food. In 2019, estimates reveal that about 2 billion people are affected by moderate or severe food insecurity. Figure 2 presents an explanation of the various levels of severity of food insecurity.

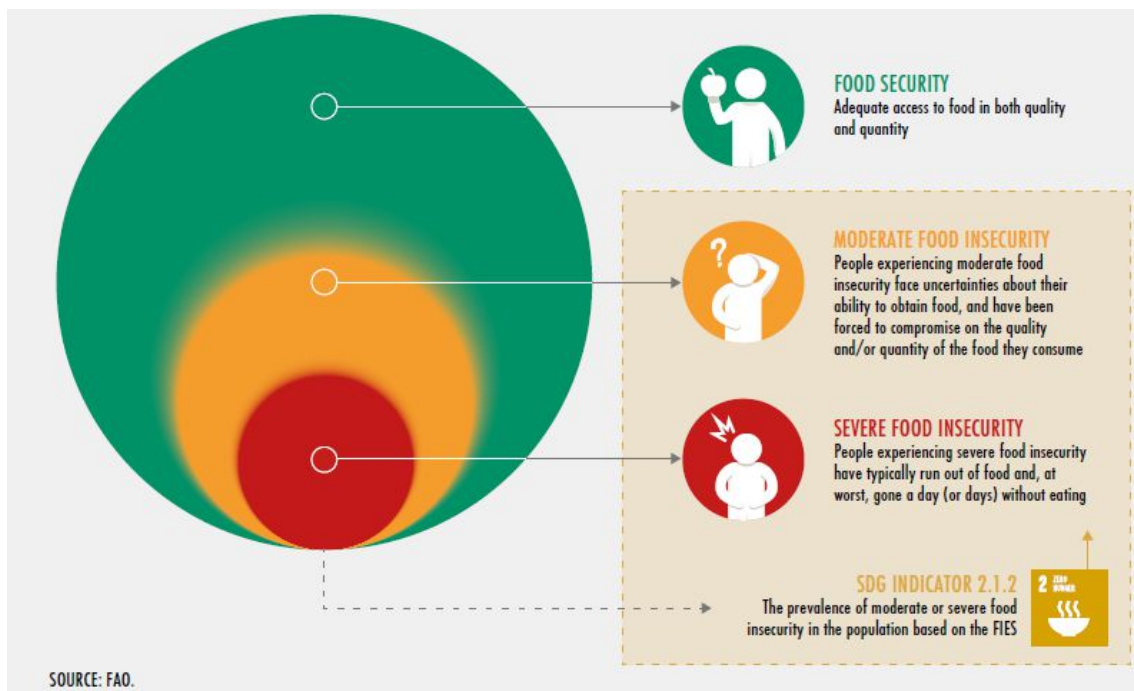


Figure 2 - Severity levels of food insecurity

Food insecurity can deteriorate the diet, increasing the risk of worsening malnutrition as well as overweight and obesity. Low-income countries are essentially dependent on staple food (eg cereals and tubers) and less on fruit and vegetables or animal products compared to higher-income countries. Access to food is still a challenge, especially in accessing healthy diets.

Some estimates suggest that for 3 billion people access to healthy diets is unaffordable, since they estimate that they are five times more expensive than a diet that meets only energy needs (cereal-based diet).

To increase accessibility to healthier diets, the costs of more nutritious foods have to decrease. Countries need to balance agricultural policies and incentives for more sensitive investment to nutrition issues and policy actions along the food supply chain in order to reduce food waste and increase efficiency at all stages. Social protection policies sensitive to nutrition issues to increase purchasing power and accessibility to healthy diets for the most vulnerable populations. Policies that seek to change behaviors in the diet will also be necessary.

Causes for Hunger, Malnutrition and Food Insecurity

There are several reasons why hunger has increased in recent years. Poor economic conditions are underlying causes of the increase in poverty and malnutrition. The economic slowdown, particularly since the 2008-2009 financial crisis, has had significant impacts on hunger. Despite

significant progress in many of the poorest countries, about 10% of the world population still lives on less than \$ 1.90 / day, mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southwest Asia.

A strong dependence on imports and exports is also one of the factors that makes several countries and regions more vulnerable to external shocks. Great inequalities in the distribution of income, goods and resources and the absence of effective social protection policies, also compromise access to food, especially in the most vulnerable groups.

The increase in the frequency of extreme weather events, altered environmental conditions, and the spread of pests and diseases in the past 15 years are factors that contribute to the vicious cycles of hunger and poverty, particularly when exacerbated by fragile institutions, conflicts, violence and the generalized displacement of populations. The number of people displaced in 2018 was about 70% higher than in 2010, reaching around 70.8 million people, mainly in developing countries.

Small producers and communities that directly depend on the production of their own food are the most affected by these phenomena. In addition, the prevalence of hunger is higher in countries with rapid population growth and poor access to health care and education. This establishes a direct relationship between food security, nutrition and health conditions of the population, which in turn affects the prospect of economic growth and development.

Inequalities in the Food System

The report of the Global Hunger Index (2017) highlights the issues of hunger and inequalities enhanced by power relations. The problems of hunger and malnutrition are vast and are unevenly distributed. The groups with the lowest social, economic and political power are those that suffer most from hunger and malnutrition, both in rural areas in the poorest countries and in large cities in marginalized communities in the richest countries. Thus, in order to understand these inequalities, it is necessary to understand the inequalities in power relations that operate throughout the food system. Power refers to the degree of control over material, human, intellectual and financial resources. In the food system, this power is exercised by various actors in different ways. For example, through multinational agri-food companies whose power influences food purchase and sale prices; government structures, international organizations or public-private partnerships that can influence, implement and block food policies and mobilize public opinion; or the power of individuals over the choices they have regarding their food expenses.

The inequality in the distribution of hunger and nutrition reflects the inequality of power between the two extremes of the food system: small farmers and low-pay producers and, on the other hand, the most vulnerable and marginalized groups of people facing the problems of hunger and malnutrition.

In view of this reality, the analysis of power relations can help to achieve greater justice in the distribution of food through the action of researchers and analysts in the identification of all forms of hunger and malnutrition and the associated power relations; the design of policies to support consumer behavior change, women's empowerment and food security and the role of activists, professionals and political and economic decision-makers in identifying the necessary spaces for change, the barriers encountered, in planning possible sanctions for contain the power and empower the most vulnerable populations to increase their power in choosing the food they consume.

Bibliography

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