



Food Insecurity in Africa and India

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The *State of Food Security and Nutrition 2023*, a report published jointly by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), and World Health Organization (WHO), presents a worrying picture of global food security, especially with respect to Africa and South Asia.

While the Report notes a small reduction in incidence of undernutrition as compared to 2022, the number of undernourished persons is higher than before the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2020, there were between 691 and 783 million undernourished people, about 122 million less than in 2021, but still higher than in 2019. Surprisingly, the absolute number of people experiencing chronic hunger today is the same as it was more than a decade ago, in 2006–7. All the gains made in the interim years have been “lost” to the pandemic. This demonstrates the precarity of persons just outside the boundary of what is termed undernutrition.

The second major finding is that undernutrition is still on the rise in all regions of Africa. The Report uses the Prevalence of Undernutrition indicator, defined as the “condition of an individual whose habitual food consumption is insufficient to provide, on average, the amount of dietary energy required to maintain a normal, active, and healthy life.” Using this indicator, in 2022, 19.7 per cent of the population of Africa was undernourished, up from 19.4 per cent in 2021 (or a rise of 11 million in one year). It is unconscionable that one-fifth of the people on the African continent are undernourished.

In Asia, both in absolute and relative terms, what is termed Southern Asia lags behind (comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka). In 2010, 14.4 per cent of the population of Southern Asia was undernourished; a drop from 15.6 per cent in 2022. On a global scale, 401.6 million undernourished persons were in Asia, of whom 233.9 million were in

India. With 18 per cent of the global population, India is home to 32 per cent of the global undernourished population – a shameful record that needs to remain headline news.

An alternative approach to measuring food insecurity is by estimating the cost and affordability of a healthy diet. Such an approach shows that nutrition insecurity is even more severe than suggested by indicators of undernutrition. In 2021, the Report estimated the global cost of a healthy diet to be 3.66 dollars (2017 Purchasing Power Parity or PPP dollars), an increase from 3.51 PPP in 2020 on account of food price inflation. In 2021, 42 per cent of the world population, or almost 3.2 billion people could not afford this diet. For Southern Asia, the cost of a healthy diet was calculated at 4.09 PPP dollars (up from 3.82 a year ago). Today 1.4 billion people in Southern Asia or 72 per cent of the population are unable to afford a healthy diet (the proportion was 70.2 in 2019 and 73.8 in 2020). India's position is particularly distressing. In 2021, 1.04 billion persons or 74.1 per cent of the population could not afford a healthy diet, a figure marginally lower than in 2020 when it was 76.2 per cent.

A third and new set of findings in the 2023 Report draw attention to the persistence of a rural-urban divide, with rural persons worse off than those in peri-urban areas and urban areas. In Southern Asia, for instance, 21.7 per cent of the rural population was severely undernourished in 2022, whereas the proportions were 20.3 in peri-urban areas and 17.6 in urban areas.

Further insights into the pattern of household expenditure including on food come from a detailed study of 11 African countries based on the Living Standard Measurement Surveys conducted in each of the countries. An important finding here is of very high food shares, that is, share of food expenditure in total household expenditure. The food share was over 50 per cent in five countries (Ethiopia, Mali, Malawi, Nigeria, and Niger), and as high as 64 per cent in Malawi and 63 per cent in Ethiopia. Economists and policy makers have often used the food share as an important indicator of food security. (It is noteworthy that in the United States, households with a food share of more than 33 per cent are eligible for the Food Stamp Programme). Unfortunately, we do not have data on food shares in India after the Consumer Expenditure Survey of 2011–12.

The data from these 11 countries show that purchase of food was widely prevalent among rural households, countering the idea of “subsistence farming,” that is, of households reliant entirely on production from their family farm. The majority of rural households in all 11 countries depended on market purchases for consumption. The share of production from the family farm in food consumption ranged from 8 to 50 per cent across the 11 countries.

Food insecurity continues to ravage large areas of the globe, and the situation has only become worse after the pandemic. For India, whose government has curtailed the collection and dissemination of data, not only has hunger worsened, it has also become increasingly difficult to measure and meaningfully address. The fact of mass chronic hunger must be faced head on with meaningful government intervention.