

Feeding a post-COVID world

Global lockdown exposes the urgent need to transform our fragile, unsustainable food systems – or billions more will go hungry

By **Cindy Holleman**, Senior Economist of Food Security and Nutrition, Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN

Even before COVID-19, the world was well off course to end hunger. In 2014, levels of hunger began to rise, wiping away decades of progress. The current pandemic is yet another shock – with unprecedented global reach – that is undermining our efforts to reach the Sustainable Development Goal of ending hunger by 2030 (SDG 2).

It is also a wake-up call that offers an opportunity to re-evaluate how we tackle the root causes of our predicament and start anew, before it is too late. This ‘pause’ requires that we look honestly at the facts on hunger – not only on how we define hunger, but also at the drivers behind the trends and inequalities in access to food that lie at the heart of the problem. It requires that we understand the interconnected nature of these drivers, and the shortcomings of our food systems.

Hunger and food insecurity

There is ample food for everyone on the planet. Data show that there are more than enough calories or dietary energy available to meet every individual’s needs. This holds true across all country-income groups, including low-income countries. We live in a world that has achieved extraordinary economic growth, resulting in the unprecedented accumulation of wealth.

Yet, despite these achievements, the paradox is that millions of people around

the world still face basic deprivation in terms of hunger, food insecurity and malnourishment. In countries both rich and poor, low disposable income relative to the high cost of food is the most serious impediment to accessing not only minimum dietary needs, but also the nutritious foods essential for a healthy, active life.

The unaffordability of healthy foods is associated with increasing food insecurity and all forms of malnutrition, including stunting, wasting, being overweight and obesity. Diet quality is a critical link between food security and nutrition. Unhealthy diets are a leading cause of non-communicable diseases, many of which form the underlying health conditions that make COVID-19 so deadly for so many people. Meeting the food security and nutrition targets of SDG 2 will only be possible if people not only have enough to eat, but are also eating food that is nutritious.

The latest *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* report provides a clear picture of the predicament the world faces. Using the traditional measure of hunger – the minimum dietary energy requirement – nearly 690 million people in the world suffer from undernourishment or chronic food deprivation. But if we look beyond the calories and consider whether that food is nutritious or healthy, we see that more than 1.5 billion people cannot afford a diet that meets essential nutrient needs and that three billion people cannot afford the cheapest healthy diet.



Healthy diets are more than double the cost of a diet that merely meets nutrient requirements, and are five times more expensive than a diet that only meets minimum energy requirements. Most of the poor around the world, in both rich and poor countries, cannot afford either a nutrient-adequate or a healthy diet. The least cost of either diet is far more expensive than the full value of the international poverty line of \$1.90 per person per day. Where hunger and food insecurity are greater, the cost of a healthy diet even exceeds average national food expenditures.

The greatest threats to food security

We were not doing well even before COVID-19 hit. The latest estimates show



© UNICEF/RyengR

that 10 million more people suffered chronic food deprivation in the last year and nearly 60 million more have become hungry in the last five years.

Increasing climate variability and frequent climate extremes are a significant threat to food security and are a key driver behind the recent rise in hunger. Evidence shows that significant increases in chronic hunger are occurring in countries where agriculture, food supply chains and livelihoods are vulnerable to climate extremes. Food price spikes and volatility, often combined with losses in agricultural income, follow climate extremes. They reduce access to food and negatively affect the quantity, quality and dietary diversity of the food consumed.

Civil insecurity and conflict also threaten food security. Marked increases in the number and complexity of conflicts in the last 10 years have eroded gains in food security, leading several countries to the brink of famine. Internal conflicts have surpassed the number of interstate conflicts, with a significant rise in internationalised internal conflicts. More than half of the people that are undernourished live in countries struggling with some form of conflict, violence or fragility. Conflict often damages access to food, as it causes deep economic recessions that drive up inflation, disrupts employment and erodes finances for social protection.

Indeed, economic slowdowns and recessions are another prominent driver

▲ Families visit an outreach clinic in Verteth, South Sudan for nutrition and health checkups. Civil war, ongoing conflict and floods have made the world's newest country also one of the world's most food insecure. Twelve UN agencies are active in the country, with the objective of increasing community resilience, strengthening governance and reinvigorating the local economy

behind rises in hunger, irrespective of whether they are driven by market swings, trade wars, political unrest or a global pandemic. Most countries where hunger has increased have experienced economic slowdowns or recessions. Of the 77 countries that experienced a rise in hunger between 2011 and 2017, 65 of them saw their economy slowing or contracting. Economic declines are also statistically related to rising food insecurity. They

negatively affect access to food as they lead to rises in unemployment and declines in wages and incomes. People's access to food, especially for the poor who spend a large portion of their income on food, can be severely affected. Access to nutritious food is even more compromised, due to the higher relative cost.

COVID-19 is delivering yet another economic hit, and is projected to plunge most nations into recession in 2020, with per capita income contracting in more countries than at any time since 1870. We are facing one of the deepest global recessions in decades, despite the extraordinary efforts of governments to counter the downturn with fiscal and monetary policy support. As many as 132 million more people could go hungry in 2020 as a result of COVID-19. The pandemic is hitting hard, upending food supply chains and eroding people's ability to purchase food as they lose their income and livelihoods.

Underlying all these contributory drivers is the primary culprit: inequality. Income and wealth inequalities are closely associated with access to food, both in terms of people running out of food and experiencing hunger (severe food insecurity), and facing uncertainties about their ability to obtain food and having to compromise on food quality or quantity (moderate food insecurity).

Income inequality has been shown to increase the likelihood of food insecurity and undercut the positive effect of any economic growth on individual food security. These findings are significant, as inequality in income has remained high and persistent in all countries, and is rising in nearly half the countries in the world. The pandemic is only accelerating this inequality.

Actions to tackle hunger

First, we must fundamentally change the way we report hunger, food security and, by extension, poverty. Poverty is currently

defined by the income required to meet basic needs, including minimum food or energy needs. Yet it is now clear that the international poverty line cannot provide access to even the cheapest of nutrient requirements, let alone nutritious foods and a healthy diet.

In a world of wealth it is a crime against humanity to set the bar so low. There are billions of people technically above the line who in reality are hungry, food insecure or living in poverty. We need to show the extent of hunger in the world as it really is, and move from basic energy requirements to minimum healthy diets as our primary measure.

Governments must place the pursuit of affordable healthy diets at the heart of agricultural policies, social protection and investment decisions. To increase affordability, the cost of nutritious foods must come down. This requires intervention along the entire food supply chain to eliminate food losses and enhance efficiencies. Coupled with this, governments must also implement complementary policies that promote healthy diets.

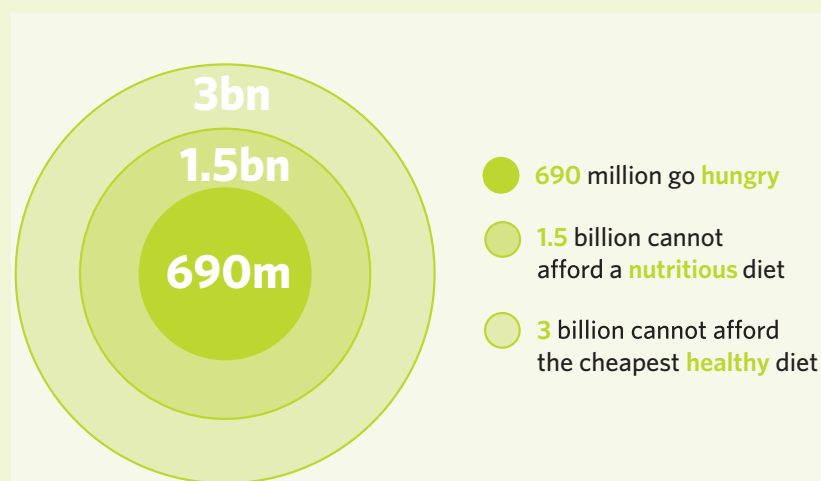
Sustainability must be an integral part of this endeavor. Currently, our food systems are successful at producing low-cost calories that feed a demand for unhealthy diets. They also generate up to one third of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Without action, the healthcare costs of non-communicable disease and mortality associated with poor diets are projected to exceed \$1.3 trillion per year by 2030, and the social costs of GHG emissions could reach more than \$1.7 trillion.

Yet win-win solutions are within our grasp. According to the *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020* report, shifting to healthy diets could reduce direct and indirect health costs by up to 97 per cent by 2030, and slash the social cost of GHG emissions by between 41 and 74 per cent.

We must also deal with the urgent challenges created by conflict, climate variability and extremes, and economic slowdowns. Addressing the root causes of conflict will involve humanitarian,

Hunger, malnutrition and health

Hunger is the uncomfortable or painful sensation caused by not meeting the minimum dietary energy requirement. Hunger, sometimes referred to as undernutrition, is a subset of malnutrition that results from deficiencies, excesses or imbalances in the consumption of macro or micronutrients. The term 'healthy diet' goes a step beyond 'nutritious': a nutritious diet provides the minimum levels of energy and micronutrients, whereas a healthy diet promotes good health and helps protect against non-communicable diseases.



development and peace-building strategies that meet immediate needs, while making the necessary investments to build resilience for lasting peace and food security and nutrition for all.

Meeting the challenge posed by climate variability and extremes requires that we scale up actions to strengthen the resilience and adaptive capacity of people and the agricultural and food systems. We need integrated – rather than dissociated – disaster risk reduction and management and climate change adaption policies, programmes and practices with short, medium and long-term vision.

Economic resilience must be strengthened to safeguard food security and nutrition against economic adversity. Short and medium-term policies should aim at achieving a pro-poor and inclusive transformation, but this will not be possible by focusing only on economic growth.

In the short term, countries need to protect incomes and purchasing power to counteract economic adversity. In the longer term, countries must invest to reduce economic vulnerabilities and inequalities; build capacity to withstand shocks; maintain health and other social expenditures; and use policy tools to create healthier food environments. Existing inequalities must be tackled at all levels, through focused, multi-sectoral policies.

The good news is that we have the knowledge and tools needed to do these things. We also have the experience and evidence that lead to successful policies and practices. We have the know-how, means, wealth and capacity to end hunger and all forms of malnutrition, and to transform how we use the land and generate energy. Achieving them is a matter of politics, not scarcity.

The unaffordability of nutritious food in a world of wealth is a global tragedy. Making healthy diets universally affordable should be a cause for our times. It will improve billions of lives and save trillions in health and environmental costs. COVID-19 has exposed the fragility of food security, but also shows us that transforming our food systems can put us back on track to ending world hunger. ●

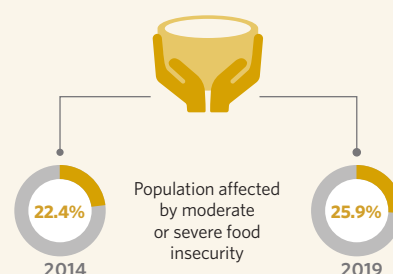
2 ZERO HUNGER



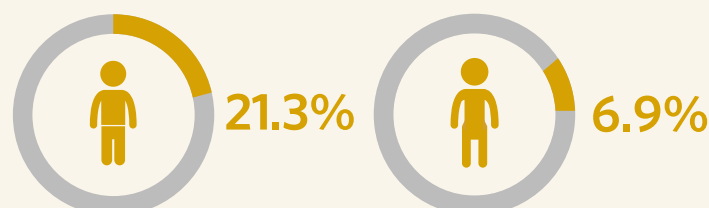
End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Food insecurity was already on the rise before COVID-19. An estimated **2 billion** people were affected by moderate or severe food insecurity in 2019

Those facing severe food insecurity – around 750 million people – tend to run out of food and, at worst, go a day, or days, without eating.



Stunting and wasting among children under 5 are likely to worsen

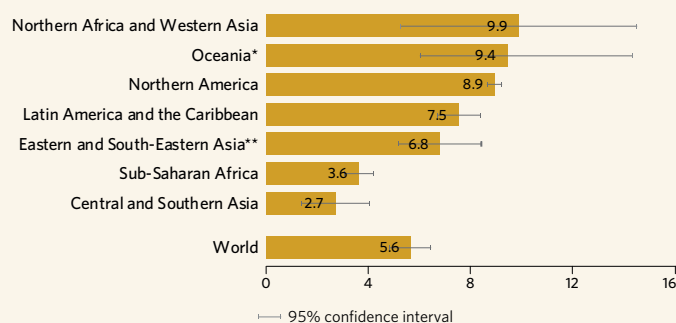


144 million children under 5 are stunted. Chronic undernutrition, or stunting, puts children at greater risk of dying from common infections. It is also associated with poor cognitive development.

47 million children under 5 are affected by wasting (2019). Wasting is when under-nutrition results in low weight-for-height.

Proportion of children under 5 who are overweight, 2019 (percentage)

Excess weight in childhood is recognised as a global public health problem because of its pernicious effect on incidence of acute and chronic diseases, and the impact it has on healthy development and overall quality of life.



— 95% confidence interval

* Excluding Australia and New Zealand.

** Excluding Japan.

Note: Data coverage is low for Europe, so it is not included in the chart