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## Urbanisation of hunger: the rural drift drives hunger to the cities

If people living in a rich country were surveyed to find out how they see world hunger, it is almost certain that the result would be that the most frequent view is that hunger hits mostly rural Africa, particularly in countries at war. This view is a result of what people can hear and see on the media either in case of a serious localised crisis or, every year, when they listen to the morning news on the World food day (16 October).

This corresponds largely to a myth [\[read\]](#).

First, it is important to remember that if Africa is the region where the **proportion** of the total population that is suffering from undernourishment is the largest (estimated at 19.9% by FAO in 2018, compared to around 11% for the world as a whole), it is in Asia that can be found the largest **number** of people in a situation of chronic food insecurity (close to 514 million persons, compared to 256 million in Africa, in 2018) [\[read\]](#).

Second, it must be known that food insecurity is becoming every day more urban. Indeed, the world population is increasingly urbanised as a large number of rural



people – in their majority rural poor – migrate towards cities in search of a better life. This movement, on-going for long, made that while in 1960 urban population

represented only little more than 30% of total world population, it has virtually reached 50% today and will weigh more than 65% by 2050 [[United Nations Population Division](#)]

In 2013, in our very first article on [hungerexplained.org](#) dedicated to facts and figures on world hunger, we had drawn the attention of our readers on the fact that, with time, hunger would become more and more an urban phenomenon [[read](#)]. We had then based our view on a report by the [M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation](#) that analysed the food situation in Indian cities.

An article by Manipadma Jena published on Inter Press Service in 2017 appropriately reminds us that this evolution is on-going and can be observed in the Asian megalopolises, particularly in India and China [[read](#)]. Already today, she writes, one out of 3 children aged less than 5 who are stunted lives in an urban area.

Quoting the [Global Land outlook 2017](#), she reminds us that the world urban population is expected to double between 2000 and 2030, while the area taken by cities will be multiplied by three and increase by 1.3 million square kilometers (roughly 2.5 times the size of France!). For example, this expansion of urban areas will affect 6% of the Asian agricultural production. 90% of the increase of urban population will take place in Asia and Africa, mostly in Asia. In rich countries, like in Europe, this rural drift is a much older and almost concluded process.

Of course, the exodus of people from the countryside towards cities changes them – they are initially mostly farmers – into food consumers who are obliged, once in towns, to earn the money required to buy the totality of their food. For many of them, more than 60% of the money they will earn will go straight into the purchase of food.

As Jena explains with an example, the smallest event in their life, the slightest increase of the price of food may throw these newcomers into a serious food security situation. She emphasises also the fact that single migrants are often unable to do their cooking, be it because of lack of space, facilities or time; this obliges them to rely heavily on street-food or – our addition here – to consume industrial processed food that are poor in nutriment and rich in fat, salt and sugar [[read](#)].

Migrations from the countryside towards cities also frees a part of agricultural land. But this part is much lower than the proportion of the population that leaves the rural zone, essentially because it is usually poor farmers owning little land – often marginal land, less fertile than the average – or landless labourers who make up the majority of migrants.

Some of these migrants leave precisely because they have been dispossessed of their land (either by land-grabbing or because their land was seized or had to be sold in order to reimburse their debts – there are many cases where farmers have

been dispossessed of their land) or simply because they do not have any more the means to earn a living from their land because of its degradation, because of climate change or by lack of means required, financial in particular, to produce and have access to more sustainable and productive technology.

The changes in process and their aggravation will require to adapt measures used to fight against hunger, by:

- strengthening linkages between cities and the surrounding countryside to enhance the efficiency of supply chains to make it possible to pay more remunerative prices to producers while at the same time supplying affordable quality food to urban consumers (i.e. through farmers' markets and community supported agriculture);
- expanding social protection programmes targeted at the poorest population groups in urban areas, but also by developing activities aiming at creating job opportunities in urban areas and also in rural areas in order to fix a part of potential migrants in their native region;
- developing urban and peri-urban agriculture, for example by promoting community gardens.

This is quite a programme that, unfortunately, does not seem to attract much interest from the governments of the majority of countries and their development partners.

It will have required that 205 cities group together in the framework of the Milan Food Policy Pact finalised in 2015 at the time of the World Exhibition in Milano, for a coherent action to be launched to cater for the improvement of food security in urban areas.

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To know more :

- Jena, M., The Urbanization of Malnutrition, Inter Press Service, 2017
- The Milan Food Policy Pact, 2015.

Selection of past articles on [hungerexplained.org](http://hungerexplained.org) related to the topic:

- Facts and figures on world malnutrition, 2019.
- The impact of the 2007–2008 food security crisis: the uncounted social and economic cost of resilience, 2016.
- Thirteen myths about hunger.... 2015.
- Facts and figures on world hunger, 2013.