Facts and figures on world food insecurity and malnutrition

World food insecurity back to what it was 15 years ago - Lack of food and money not a valid reason

Despite progress made in some large countries, food insecurity is on the rise in many parts of the world. Rural areas, women, youths and Indigenous Peoples are particularly hit. This is what the latest UN report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) says [read]. Every year, this report is prepared jointly by FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO), in the framework of the monitoring process of the SDGs.

The 2024 report is another confirmation that the objective set by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of ending hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in all its forms by 2030 is out of reach.

Ways of achieving this objective sustainably are known and have been explored in detail on hungerexplained since 2012 [read here and here, for example]. Yet, many obstacles have been hampering progress [read], including balance of power [read] and governance [read] that prevent proper policy and investment decisions from being made.

Estimates show that the food security situation hardly improved between 2022 and 2023, reflecting uneven post-pandemic recovery across countries, the negative impact of war in Ukraine and mismanagement of the global food system leading to alarming levels of food inequality [read] and vulnerability to shocks and disruptions arising from conflict, climate variability and extremes, and economic contraction.

In addition to being off track in the combat against hunger and malnutrition, the world is also failing to make food systems more sustainable and to combat effectively multiple intertwined global crises (climate, biodiversity, land and water, inflation, etc.) and their impacts.

Food insecurity: the figures

In earlier articles on the global food situation, we had drawn the attention of readers on the three main ways to measure the extent of world malnutrition and we discussed the difficulties of making estimates, as well as issues around the stability and consistency of the numbers produced. This year we will limit this article to the result, inviting those readers interested by these questions to refer to what we had written in 2020 [read].

Moderate and severe food insecurity, as captured by surveys

The prevalence of moderate and severe food insecurity is measured on the basis of large national surveys using the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) introduced by FAO in 2014 and adopted by 59 countries covering more than a quarter of the world population, complemented by the results of the Gallup© World Poll (GWP). The principle here is to ask people about their experience.

The estimates over the years during which the surveys were conducted show that, after a period of serious deterioration, the food security situation has been relatively stable globally in 2021/2023, but that a growing number of people have yet been experiencing moderate and acute food insecurity particularly in Africa, as well as in a part of Europe. Food insecurity strongly increased during the pandemic, and reached a plateau after 2020 (**Figure 1**).

Table 1 below shows that nearly one person out of 9 in the world - **864 million** - declared having suffered from **severe** food insecurity in 2023. This proportion was **almost one person out of five in Africa** (316 million people) and close to **one out of ten in Asia** (467 million people). Women were slightly more affected than men.

In Africa, the number of people experiencing severe food insecurity increased by 7 million between 2022 and 2023. The share of people concerned grew in all sub-regions of the continent, but in Eastern and Southern Africa. In Asia, Southern and to a lesser extent Western Asia are the sub-regions where the prevalence of severe food insecurity was highest. In Latin America, prevalence decreased strongly, while in the Caribbean, it continued to rise. In Europe, the number of severely food insecure increased in Northern and Western Europe, while it grew slightly in North America.

The increase between 2015 and 2023 is of 310 million people, mostly in Asia and in Africa.

Table 1: Evolution of the number of people having experienced severe food insecurity (in millions) (2015-2023)

Region	2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Variation (2023-2015)
Africa	200	253	282	301	309	316	115,5
Asia	296	383	457	479	459	467	171,7
Latin America & Caribbean	40	56	72	80	73	58	17,7
Oceania	3	4	4	5	4	5	1,3
Northern America & Europe	15	10	13	15	17	18	3,6
World	554	706	828	880	862	864	309,8

Source: FAO

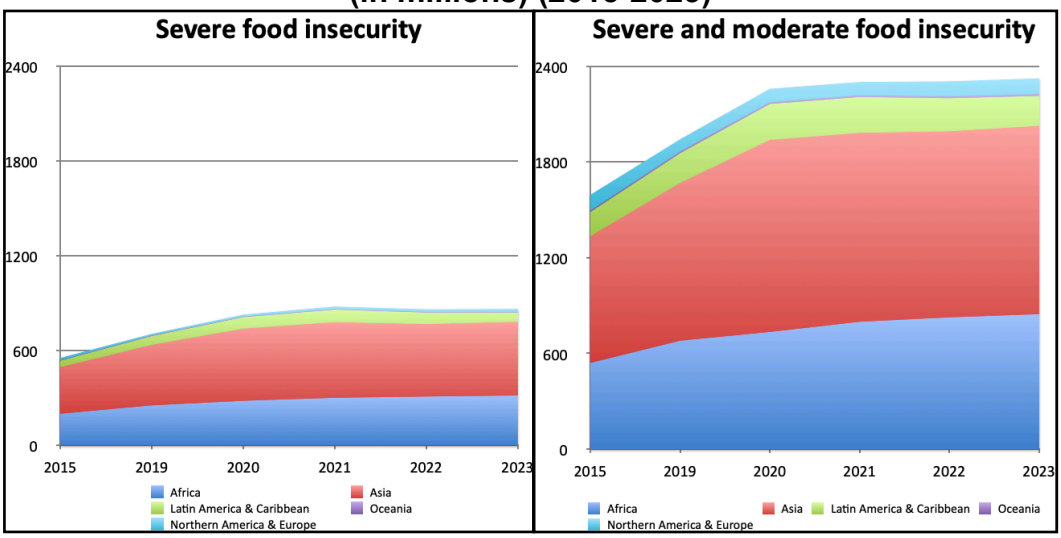
Table 2 shows an incredible figure of more than **2.3 billion people** who experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in the world in 2023 (almost 1 person out of 3). This proportion was of nearly **one out of two persons in Africa** (847 million) and close to **one out of four in Asia** (1.18 billion people).

Table 2: Evolution of the number of people having experienced severe and moderate food insecurity (in millions) (2015-2022)

Region	2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Variation (2023-2015)
Africa	541	680	735	799	826	847	306,0
Asia	794	989	1204	1185	1167	1181	386,6
Latin America & Caribbean	152	187	226	225	207	188	35,4
Oceania	9	11	10	11	11	12	3,6
Northern America & Europe	99	77	85	84	95	98	-1,4
World	1595	1943	2260	2303	2307	2325	730,2

Source: FAO

Figure 1: Evolution of severe and moderate food insecurity in the regions (in millions) (2015-2023)



Source: FAO data

The very high jump in the number of food insecure after 2019 can clearly be linked to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic that have been highlighted on hungerexplained.org since early 2020 [read here and here], even though the pandemic is not the only explanation but rather an accelerator of past trends resulting from weaknesses of food systems, as illustrated by the fact that the prevalence of food insecurity experience has been growing throughout the period 2015-2022. The food price rise observed from 2020 onwards can be considered as one of the causes of prevalent food insecurity. While the war in Ukraine played its part after April 2021, the earlier price hike can be put on the account of the leap of fossil energies (oil and gas) prices when China's economy recovered after the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. This hike was a consequence of the period of low investments in the oil sector that followed the oil price drop seen after 2014. Higher energy prices caused higher production costs in agriculture (more expensive fertiliser and fuel) and they boosted the use of food commodities for manufacturing agrofuels, particularly in the US and the EU. In the EU, for instance, around 11 million tonnes of vegetable oil (equivalent to 45% of the total use of vegetable oil in the Union) were being used as fuel [read pp. 8-9].

Between 2015 and 2023, 310 million additional people experienced severe food insecurity, while another 420 million more people were exposed to moderate food security (**Figure 1 illustrates this evolution**).

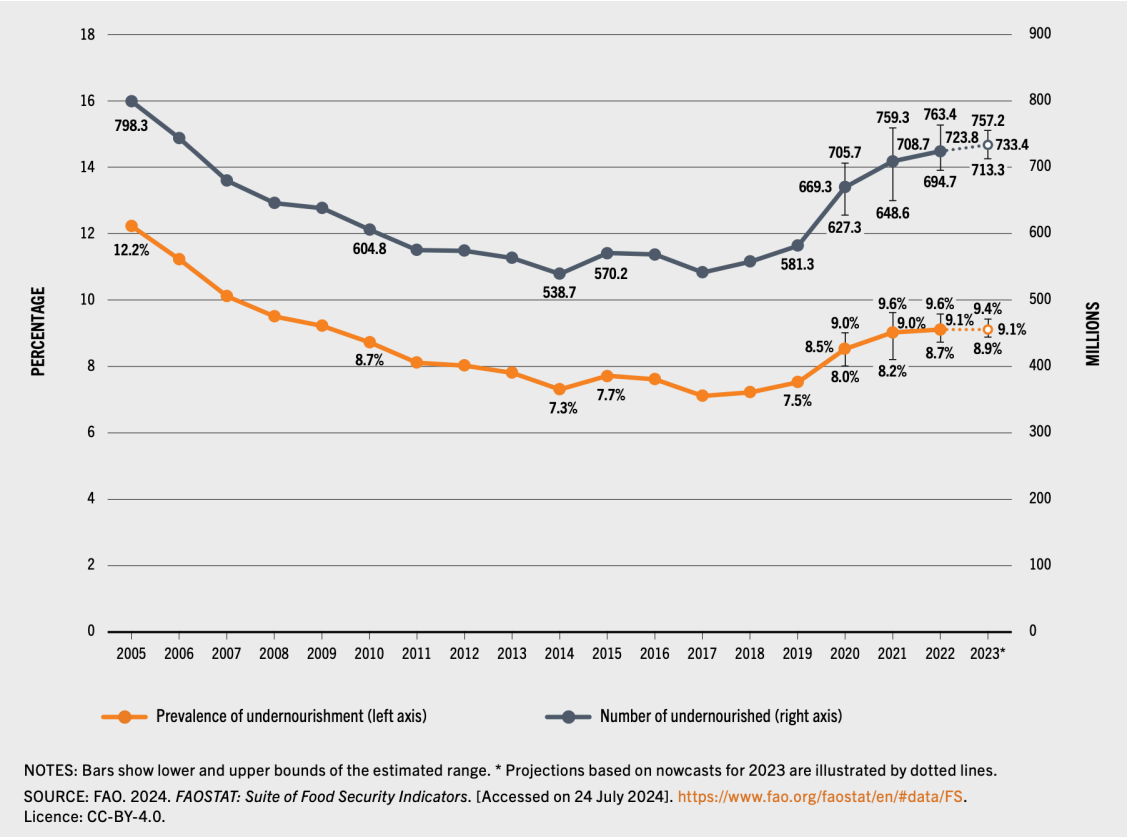
Estimates of the number of people suffering from chronic undernourishment

Statistics on chronic undernourishment[1] have been produced for several decades by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) through the publication, since 1999 of its flagship report, SOFI (see the first SOFI of 1999).

In July 2024 the latest of this series of SOFI reports displays data estimates that suggest that there were between **713 and 757 million chronically undernourished people in the world in 2023**, equivalent to 9-9.5% of total world population[2] (**Figure 2**).

In 2023, around 52% of the world's undernourished were found in Asia (385 million) and more than 41% in Africa (298 million). Compared with 2015, about 106 million more people were affected by hunger in 2023 in Africa, 48 million more in Asia, and almost 10 million more in Latin America and the Caribbean. These figures are consistent with movement observed in the above data drawn from the FIES survey.

Figure 2: Evolution of the number and percentage of chronically undernourished people in the world (2005-2022)



NOTES: Bars show lower and upper bounds of the estimated range. * Projections based on nowcasts for 2023 are illustrated by dotted lines.
SOURCE: FAO. 2024. *FAOSTAT: Suite of Food Security Indicators*. [Accessed on 24 July 2024]. https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/FS.

Source: FAO

[1] Chronically undernourished people are unable to meet their minimum food requirements over a sustained period of time. This is fundamentally different from those people who suffer from a transitory undernourishment that may occur as a short term or temporary situation. [FAO]

[2] These figures are estimated for individual countries on the basis of a computation that uses as inputs (i) dietary energy consumption per person that is derived from production, trade and population statistics; (ii) the coefficient of variation of this consumption based on results of past household surveys or derived from a statistical model, and; (iii) the average minimum individual dietary energy requirement at a certain level of activity, based on the age and sex structure of the population. The methodological details are provided in Annex 1B of the report SOFI 2021.

The total estimated number of undernourished in 2023 is roughly equivalent to the number in 2006/2007 (see **Figure 2** above), illustrating a lost decade-and-a-half in the combat against food insecurity and undernourishment, despite a general commitment (in words) to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, and the launching of several initiatives aiming to eradicate hunger. Between 2022 and 2023, the number of undernourished increased by 10 million in the world while it rose by 14 million in Africa and decreased by 2 million in Asia.

This is no surprise, considering the type of food and agricultural policies and strategies that are being implemented, particularly in Africa [read], and the frequent - if not general - inconsistency observed between government policy commitments and statements, on the one hand, and their actual action, on the other [read pp. 4 to 6].

However, considering the availability of sufficient food worldwide and the volume of global financial resources, this situation is intolerable. Let's recall here that agricultural production has never been so high over the period for which statistics are available and that its gross value (in constant US dollars) increased by 37% between 2006 and 2022 (FAOSTAT). Let's also recall that the total amount of money owned worldwide in 2017 was estimated at USD 215,000 billion [read] representing around 2.5 times the annual global GDP and that past recent estimates of the financial resources required for eradicating hunger worldwide were less than USD 5,000 billion to be mobilised over a period of several years [read p. 95]. Let's also be aware that military expenditure has seen a record growth in 2023 (+6.8%) to reach almost USD 2,500 billion [read], to be compared to 1,650 billion in 2015.

Table 3: Estimates of the number of undernourished people in the world (in millions) (2005-2022)

Region	2005	2010	2015	2020	2023	Variation (from 2015 to 2023)
Africa	184	167	192	257	298	106
Asia	553	391	336	362	385	48
Latin America and the Caribbean	50	36	33	42	41	9
Oceania	2	3	3	3	3	1
Northern America and Europe	n.r.	n.r.	n.r.	n.r.	n.r.	-
World	**798**	**605**	**570**	**669**	**733**	**99**

Note: Figures do not add up.
2023 figures are projected values.
Source: FAO

To the explanatory factors usually given by the UN (war, climate change and economic downturn), one should therefore add the economic policy measures, particularly in the area of food and agriculture, adopted by countries mostly under the influence of international organisations, especially financial organisations, large multinational companies and other powerful lobbies (Box) [read].

In Africa, government policies and programmes, as well as private sector- and donor-led initiatives such as AGRA have contributed to further marginalise poor farmers by supporting large private investments frequently under the control of powerful financial operators, the penetration of multinationals in input markets (seeds, fertiliser and pesticides) and an unregulated digitalisation of agriculture [read]. As a consequence small peasants are being deprived of their land to the benefit of private investors or excluded

from agricultural development programmes [read], and large multinationals and financial investors are collecting profits, including by siphoning off government subsidies [read].

Regrettably, there is as yet no serious discussion among national or regional decision makers on the validity of these policies with respect to the attainment of the hunger eradication goal. The main concern, for them, remains to produce more, whatever the resulting social or environmental impact may be. The way production is taking place does not matter, provided output increases quickly, even if growth is not sustainable in the longer term! This idea is still well rooted in the mind of policy-makers, even if consequences of this stance means more hunger, more rural urban migration and greater exclusion of large parts of the rural population.

The causes of hunger and malnutrition

As has been usual in the SOFI series presented by the UN, the list of causes hunger and malnutrition resulting from the "weaknesses" of food systems - conflicts, climate variability and extremes, economic slowdowns and downturns, high income inequality, low productivity and inefficient food supply chains, unaffordability of healthy diets - is suggested without pointing at the fact that these are the consequences of underlying **human decisions**, resulting from a specific balance of power and which are the real root causes of the persistence of these "weaknesses" over decades.

Conflicts are human made, climate change is due to the extraordinary boom of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions resulting from the massive use of fossil fuels by humans [read], and economic slowdowns and downturns are an effect of the rules and policy decisions that governments have made to manage the economy, The same applies regarding income inequality and poverty [read]. As for low productivity and inefficient food supply chains, they too are the consequence of technological and organizational choices made by mankind over the last century, and they are everything but "natural" or "inescapable" [read].

It is essential to point at this here from the start, to avoid proposing solutions to hunger and malnutrition that will only scratch the surface of the problems to be solved and merely alleviate in part the negative effect of fundamental choices made.

Unfortunately, this is largely what the SOFI reports do by advocating mitigating measures such as social protection to help families during conflicts, insurance and finance against extreme climatic events, cash support to vulnerable groups in case of crisis that either seem unfeasible because unrealistic (can social protection really be implemented when a conflict situation weakens the state apparatus?) or a relief that is evidently useful but does not address the true causes of the problem. Moreover, they are based on the dangerous belief that everything can be fixed with money, without modifying the real economy and its processes. We, on hungerexplained.org, have on several occasions provided a critical view of these recommendations.

It is true that, some problems can be mitigated immediately through financial means without having to wait for the root causes to be resolved and for profound changes to be enacted [read]. This should then, of course, be done without delay. But it does not exempt the world from simultaneously designing deep reforms [read] and implement them to avoid having to mobilize emergency relief again and again, while the economy continues to generate suffering for hundreds of millions of people.

Indeed, it is unrealistic to believe that it is possible to eradicate hunger and food inequalities without addressing other fundamental inequalities in our societies [read].

Some more data on undernourishment [read pp. 33-39]

- An estimated **148 million children** under five years of age (22% of the total) across the world suffered from stunted growth (low value of height for age) in 2022. Progress has been made since 2000 when prevalence was 30%, but the world is not on track to bring it down to the target of 13.5% by 2030;
- **45 million children** under five in the world were affected by wasting (weight too low for height) in 2022. That is twice the target fixed for 2030! Roughly half lived in Southern Asia and one quarter in Sub-Saharan Africa. Not surprisingly, they are mostly found in poor households.
- Around **20 million babies** (approximately 15% of the total births) are born every year with low birthweight. This is quite above the 10.5% target fixed for 2030.
- The rate of global **exclusive breastfeeding** has been improving from 37% in 2012 to 48% in 2022, but remains below the 70% global target for 2030.
- **Anaemia** in women aged 15 to 49 years has been increasing to reach 30% in 2019 (571 million) and is projected at around 32% in 2030, more than double of the global target of 14%.

Conclusion

The latest UN data on food security leave little hope of achieving SDGs by 2030. A real "miracle" would be required to bring down poverty, the main fundamental cause of food insecurity [read]. The data clearly show that food insecurity and hunger are not decreasing worldwide, as a result of the combined effect of the mismanagement of the global food system, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

The world is off track in the combat against malnutrition, as it is off track in making our food systems more sustainable and combatting climate change and its impact. In the likely absence of a "miracle", genuine commitment of governments could possibly turn around this worrying trend. But that, in itself, would be a kind of "miracle".

At hungerexplained.org, we think that unless policies followed by countries are fundamentally modified in a way that we have suggested on several occasions on this site[3], one can only expect that the degradation observed will continue in the future, along with its huge attached human cost in terms of lost lives and suffering.

Some believe that the solution can be found in the combination of pro-growth policies - even if they are exclusive and develop inequality - and social protection and education measures. In fact, when this approach is implemented, social protection is often used as a cover-up for the most violent anti-social economic policies. This, in our view, is not acceptable: root causes of poverty and inequality must be tackled, within food systems as well in society more broadly.

While social protection and education measures are indispensable and, if well designed, it is true, can contribute to creating more capacity for the poor to graduate out of poverty and food insecurity, they can only be effective if overall and sectoral economic policies

[3] See in particular: Policies for a transition towards more sustainable and climate friendly food systems 2018, Climate is changing - Food and Agriculture must too - Towards a "new food and agricultural revolution" 2016, and Seven principles for ending hunger sustainably, 2013.

(particularly but not exclusively in the food and agricultural sector) are conducive and offer opportunities for the poor to improve their living by a fairly remunerated work so as to have access to healthy diets. Social protection alone does, however, not constitute a sustainable way for eradicating malnutrition, and a solution has to be found in a manner that the environment is preserved (biodiversity, water and land resources, climate) by developing and promoting food production technologies that are sustainable and accessible to the poorest.

Materne Maetz
(August 2024)

For more information:

- FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2024 – Financing to end hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in all its forms, Rome, 2024
- FAO, Voices of the Hungry - The Food Insecurity Experience Scale. Website.

Earlier articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- Inequality in food systems - Is it realistic to believe that food systems could become more equal in an unequal society? 2023.
- The "food and agricultural transition" is ongoing Nine changes tell us to what kind of world it is leading us, 2023.
- Ukraine war and food crisis: facts and debates, 2022.
- COVID-19 and food crisis: the main operating mechanisms, 2020.
- Why famines in a world of plenty? 2017.

and all our articles under our "World Hunger" theme.

Archives on the world food situation:

- Facts and figures on world food insecurity and malnutrition - Food insecurity stable globally, but still on the rise in Africa - SDGs out of reach, 2023.
- Facts and figures on world food insecurity and malnutrition - Food insecurity is on the rise, a consequence of the current food crisis, 2022.
- Facts and figures on world food insecurity and malnutrition -The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic 2021.
- Facts and figures on world food insecurity - An alarming deterioration, 2020.
- Facts and figures on world malnutrition, 2019.
- Facts and figures on world malnutrition, 2018.
- Facts and figures on world hunger 2017.
- Facts and figures on world hunger 2015.
- Facts and figures on world hunger 2014.
- Our comments on SOFI 2013, 2013.
- Facts and figures on world hunger 2013.
- What is the real number of hungry people in the world?, 2013.