19 October 2024

Our view of hunger is changing, … so should the way we combat it (urbanisation of hunger)

Until recently, the dominant view was that hunger was essentially a rural issue. For decades, official documents have been repeatedly stating that around 75% of the hungry were living in rural areas [read p. 5]. As a consequence, strategies aiming at reducing food insecurity were heavily agriculture and rural development oriented.

However, of late, as urban population increased, a number of events have been pointing at a progressive urbanisation of hunger, documented by studies quantifying this process. This evolution was evidently bound to have effects on the way efforts to eradicate food insecurity should be organised.

In 2013, on hungerexplained, we had drawn the attention of our readers to the fact that hunger was becoming progressively an urban phenomenon, particularly in some countries (e.g. Kenya and India) for which evidence of this change was demonstrated [read].

In 2019, we discussed urbanisation and its causes, among which, most important – but not exclusive – is the migration by millions of people from the countryside to cities because of poverty: they comprise small farmers, landless labourers and victims of various forms of land grabbing who lost their main source of livelihood

[read]. And we noted that, clearly, hunger is quite different if you are a small farmer living in a rural area, or if you are a migrant living in a shanty town of a large metropolis.

In 2023, in an article on food assistance in rich countries illustrated with examples from France and the US [read], it appeared that, in these quite urbanised countries, the majority of the food insecure were living in urban areas or in poor suburban neighbourhoods.

In rural areas, the way out of hunger could be to try and boost food production (and, possibly, the production of cash crops for sale, to earn the money required to purchase food) or to seek complementary job opportunities as agricultural labourer or wage labour in non-agricultural activities conducted in rural areas.

In urban areas, food insecurity has many facets. It is made of the search for small wage jobs, of attempts to participate in risky petty trade as street vendor, of the hunt of cheap food and of any opportunity to obtain free food (e.g. food banks, food distribution centers or school feeding programmes) [read here and here].

These two situations are quite contrasted. In the first case, people are mainly depending on access to land and to means of production, and on weather; in the second case, they have to rely on the skills they may have, on the availability of jobs and the income they may generate, on the existence of food assistance programmes, and on the affordability of food available on local urban markets.

This difference is particularly acute in crises situations as they make people more vulnerable. This was true, in case of the 2007-2008 food security crisis, when prices rocketed [read here and here] and during the COVID-19 pandemic [read here and here] when, because the economy was blocked in towns, millions migrated back temporarily to rural areas [read], while others struggled to survive in cities where activities were at a standstill [read].

Strong evidence that hunger has changed

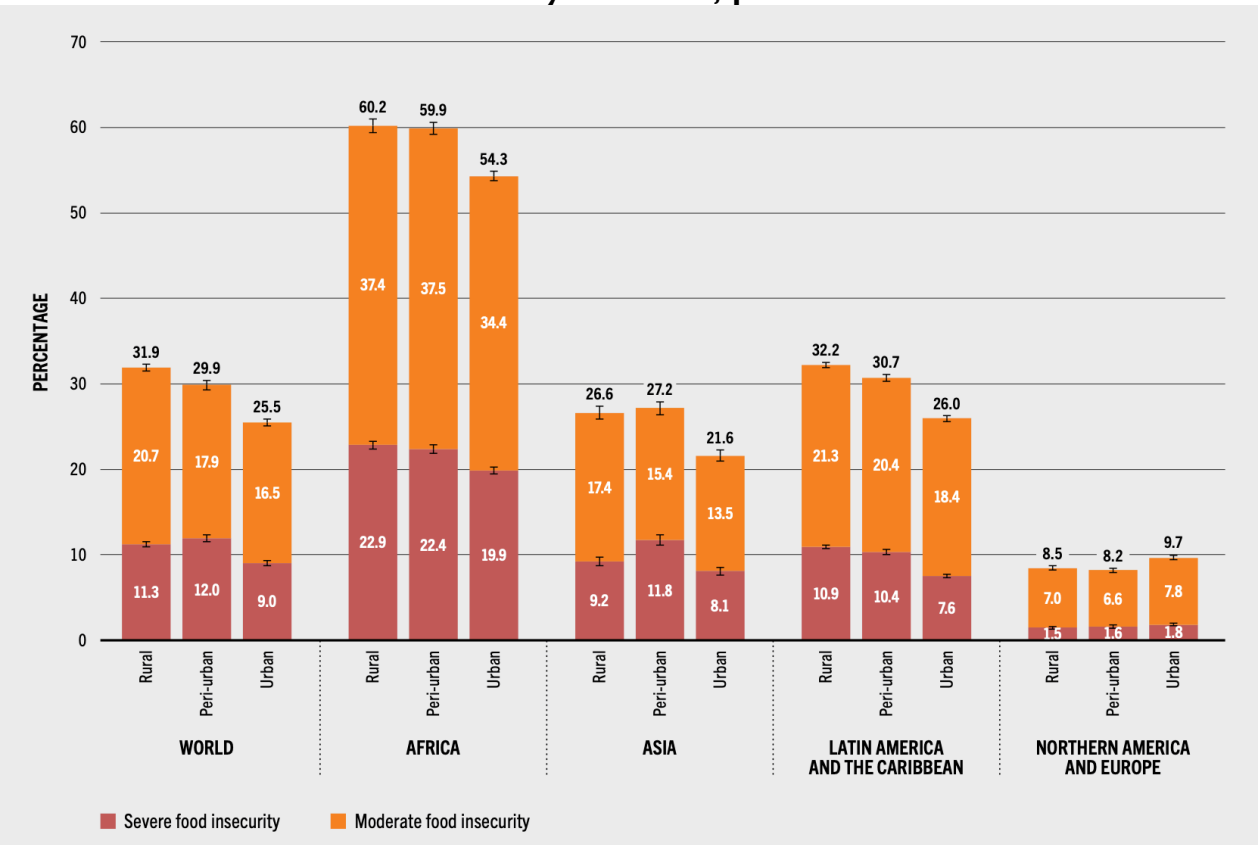
For the first time in the 2023 'State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World' (SOFI) [read], food insecurity data was made available in a disaggregated way between urban, peri-urban and urban areas[1]. This was made possible by georeferencing data from the national surveys to estimate severe and moderate food insecurity as experienced by people.

Latest estimates, published in SOFI 2024, suggest that, globally, prevalence of moderate and severe food insecurity is still highest in rural areas (31.9%), followed by peri-urban areas (29.9%) and urban areas (25.5%) [read].

[1] Urban, peri-urban and rural areas are defined according to the recent DEGURBA (degree of urbanisation) classification developed by EUROSTAT, ILO, FAO, OECD, UN-Habitat and the World Bank in 2020 [for more details, read].

In Africa, where the prevalence is highest, it reaches 60.2% in rural areas, 59.9% in peri-urban areas and 54.3% in rural areas. In Asia, prevalence of food insecurity is highest in peri-urban areas, while in Europe and North America, it is highest in urban areas (see the graph below).

Prevalence of food insecurity in urban, peri-urban and rural areas



Source: SOFI 2024.

Based on the breakdown of total population into urban, peri-urban and rural resulting from the use of the DEGURBA method presented in the 2022 World Cities Report [read p. 34], it is possible to make rough estimates of the number food insecure people in urban, peri-urban and rural areas at world level by applying the data shown in the preceding graph (see table below).

An estimate of the order of magnitude of the number of food insecure in urban, peri-urban and rural areas in 2023 (in millions)

World	Urban	Peri-urban	Rural	Total
Severely food insecure	361	300	208	869
Moderately food insecure	641	434	368	1443
TOTAL	1001	735	576	2312

Source: own calculations based on SOFI 2024 and World Cities Report 2022.
Note: the urban, peri-urban and rural breakdown of total population in WCR 2022 refers to the year 2015. This probably slightly underestimates the figures for urban and peri-urban areas and somewhat overestimates them for rural areas.

The above table clearly suggests that the traditionally accepted idea that hunger is primarily a rural phenomenon should now be considered as something **of the past**. While 75% of the food insecure might have lived in rural areas a few decades ago, **only 1 out of 4 is nowadays rural**. With urbanisation and the development of peri-urban areas, the food insecure are now found mostly in urban (**43%** of the total) and in peri-urban areas (**32%** of the total).

This change should be reflected in the analysis of food insecurity and in the formulation of updated strategies, policies and programmes to combat it worldwide.

In fact, it now appears that the rural/urban dichotomy does not provide anymore an appropriate framework for analysing food systems. In reality, rural, peri-urban and urban areas are interdependent and form a continuum [read p. xxiii], and the analysis of food insecurity should take into account the specific conditions prevailing in these zones, as well as the relationships existing among them that are relevant to food.

A large share of activities occurring in food value chains are now located in peri-urban areas that often act as a link between rural and urban areas. They are frequently rural areas that have been progressively industrialising and are offering new services.

This process has been ongoing in rich countries and in some emerging countries (i.e. China, parts of India, parts of Africa) where urbanisation has taken place without major migration flows and as a result of in situ industrialisation. This has sometimes led to massive reduction of poverty [read].

In other cases, urbanisation has been without industrialisation, as in parts of Africa and South Asia. It then leads to the creation of what some call 'hidden cities' where people are concentrated in peri-urban pockets of poverty [read] that may, to some extent, explain the high level of food insecurity observed in peri-urban areas of Africa and Asia[2].

Implications

From a historical point of view, the development of food systems has been largely driven and structured by food demand from cities. They were designed to supply urban dwellers with cheap food from surrounding rural areas [read]. The result, however, has been unjust food systems that put pressure on the rural world, generate poverty and food insecurity, and favour the development of an unsustainable and vulnerable agriculture, while, at the same time, failing to provide affordable and healthy diets to people [read here and here].

[2] A more detailed, country-by-country, analysis of prevalence of food insecurity in peri-urban areas shows particularly high scores (higher than in rural areas) for Central Africa, South Asia and the Caribbean, and, more generally for low-income countries.

This is the diagnosis made by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) in their latest report 'Strengthening urban and peri-urban food systems to achieve food security and nutrition, in the context of urbanisation and rural transformation' [read].

The HLPE report makes an inventory of causes of food insecurity in urban and peri-urban areas, regrouping them along the six dimensions of food security:

- **availability** of food (oversupply leading to waste and pollution),
- **access** to food (income, social and spatial inequalities),
- **utilisation** of food (unsafe food due to poor storage and unsatisfactory processing resulting from unequal access to basic services – water, sanitation and reliable and affordable energy –, as well as other factors such as poor housing),
- **stability** (fluctuating sources of income, variability of market prices),
- **agency** (dependence on purchased food and power asymmetries, non-inclusion in local food system governance), and
- **sustainability** (non-sustainability of food systems considered from production to consumption).

These causes are affected by the spatial characteristics of cities that may produce various inequalities and exposure to a variety of risks and hazards (e.g. in slums).

However, while these causes are all quite relevant and important to consider, they are mostly the consequence of underlying root causes that generate them and which the HLPE does not discuss in their report.

While growth of cities (and of peri-urban areas) and of the food demand they generate play a key role in the current structuring and outcome of food systems, this structuring and outcome could have been quite different if the economic, social and political context had not been what it is, namely, the results of a balance of power between the state and major economic actors. This context evolved over time and determines the dynamics of food systems as well as of the economic system as a whole [read].

As the recommendations made by the HLPE (see the box below) result from an analysis that is largely neglecting this context, one may reasonably wonder whether they have a real chance of eradicating – or at least of reducing substantially – food insecurity in urban and peri-urban areas[3]. In fact, the analysis conducted by the HLPE, leads to the conclusion that the main power struggle is between national and local governments, omitting the fact that recommendations made, if implemented, will most probably trigger strong resistance from those who see them as detrimental to their interests (supermarkets, food industries, financial actors and digital firms active in the food system), those very powers who are currently orchestrating changes in food systems with the help of their enormous financial, technical and political means [read] and who have

[3] We have already had the opportunity of making the same type of comments on the recommendations of the HLPE for reducing food inequalities [read].

considerable influence on decisions made by governments [read our thematic page on lobbies]

A selection of innovative recommendations for achieving food security in an urban and peri-urban context

General:
- explicitly integrate food security considerations in all aspects of urban planning;

On production:
- supporting territorial systems and shorter supply chains to facilitate market access for urban and peri-urban producers and to increase accessibility of fresh produce for urban and peri-urban residents;

On trade:
- including local government in national dialogues on food-trade policy to raise awareness of the specific needs and contributions of urban and peri-urban food systems and strengthening the capacity of urban food-policy actors to engage with trade and investment policy stakeholders;

On midstream:
- encourage both public and private investments in infrastructure, logistics, innovation and technology and capacities in the intermediary sector of urban food value chains, particularly for fresh and perishable foods;
- ensure that food-system planning codes and regulations include informal processors operating in urban and peri-urban areas;

On markets and retail:
- protect and sustain traditional markets, incentivising investment in infrastructure, operations, logistics, innovation and technology, and access to water and energy, as well as fostering closer links to small-scale food producers and local communities;
- work with market traders and street vendors to improve food safety by: (i) creating an enabling environment (investment in basic infrastructure, policy and regulation, capacity building and monitoring activities); (ii) providing appropriate training and technology for value chain actors; and (iii) providing incentives for behaviour change;
- promote behaviour change towards healthier food choices by consumers through targeted education and awareness raising, including front-of-pack labelling, public education campaigns and taxation of foods high in sugar, salt and fat.

Public procurement and non-market initiatives:
- develop and support community kitchens to cater to the most vulnerable population groups and to provide a buffer in times of crises;
- develop local bylaws that support the decentralised development of food banks and community kitchens, as well as deferral of surplus food to food banks, community kitchens and other food distribution programmes.

Based on Strengthening urban and peri-urban food systems to achieve food security and nutrition, in the context of urbanization and rural transformation.

One may even doubt if a good part of these recommendations have a real chance of being adopted on a large scale and implemented without a prior transformation of the economic and political context that is, in the great majority of cases, characterised by an alliance between governments and large private corporations illustrated by the annual gathering in Davos that regroups the global political and economic elite [read].

Their implementation is bound to be in contradiction with national food policies and with the interests of the state's major private partners.

Three examples illustrate this:

- the development of shorter supply chains managed by producer organisations and consumer associations, in case it occurs on a large scale, would considerably dent the market share of 'modern' supply chains and supermarkets, the development of which is being encouraged in many countries, particularly in low- and intermediate-income countries.
- favouring fresh foods and local processing of food will be detrimental to agroindustries and limit their market share. This measure might be in contradiction with programmes for the promotion and support of agroindustries in the country;
- the development of specific codes and regulations for inclusive community structures will probably not be well accepted by existing economic actors who will see them as a preferential treatment for what they will (rightly) consider their competitors.

It is a pity that the HLPE report did not explore issues and obstacles that will certainly stand in the way of the development of inclusive urban and peri-urban food systems.

However, it is these very difficulties and the possibilities of overcoming them that will determine the success (or not) of the changes envisaged and the improvement of food security in rural and peri-urban areas that they are expected to bring about.

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To know more:

- High Level Panel of Experts, Strengthening urban and peri-urban food systems to achieve food security and nutrition, in the context of urbanization and rural transformation, Rome, Committee on World Food Security, 2024.
- FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023. Urbanization, agrifood systems transformation and healthy diets across the rural-urban continuum. Rome, FAO, 2023.
- UN-Habitat, World Cities Report 2022 – Envisaging the Future of Cities, 2022.

Selection of past articles on hungerexplained related to the topic:

- Measuring reality is quite complex – Two illustrations, 2024.
- World food insecurity back to what it was 15 years ago – Lack of food and money not a valid reason, 2024.
- 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.
- Hunger, food assistance and poverty in rich countries (with illustrations from France and the US), 2023.

- Private economic power in food systems and its new forms, 2022.
- The COVID-19 pandemic hits harder urban areas and women, 2021.
- Urbanisation of hunger: the rural drift drives hunger to the cities, 2019.
- The impact of the 2007-2008 food security crisis: the uncounted social and economic cost of resilience, 2016.
- Facts and figures on world hunger, 2013.