



Can you imagine a world in which everyone has enough food to be healthy?

Is there enough food?

Cereals—wheat, rice, maize, etc—are the staple food in most people's diets and because they are easily traded, they are a good guide to overall food production. The world produces around 300 kilograms of grain per person per year—enough to feed everyone if the food was shared equally and used efficiently.

World grain production has increased markedly throughout this century, but the rate of increase has slowed from an average of 3 percent per year between 1950 and 1984, to around 1 percent per year between 1984 and 1993. Even so, over 800 million people go to bed hungry each night (FAO 2002, p4).

What is hunger?

Essentially, hunger occurs when people do not get enough nutrients to sustain a healthy, active life. The causes may be highly visible—like the food shortages that cause widespread famines—or can be hidden.

Chronic hunger stunts growth, increases susceptibility to disease and leaves people feeling weak and lethargic, reducing their ability to work. This contributes to a cycle of hunger and poverty. The effects of hunger can reduce life expectancy to as low as 38 years. In countries where hunger is most common, one in seven children will die before the age of five (FAO 2002).



Hunger Facts

Every day, 25,000 people die from hunger and poverty.
(FAO 2002, p5)

Nearly three-quarters of the world's poor and hungry live in rural areas in the developing world.
(FAO 2002, p26)

Between 50 and 60 percent of the 12 million child deaths each year are related to malnutrition.
(FAO 2002, p6)

More than 2 billion people suffer from micronutrient deficiencies including anaemia, iodine deficiency and Vitamin A deficiency.
(FAO 2002, p24)

Seven out of ten of the world's hungry are women and girls.
(WFP 2002)

Why are people hungry?

If enough food is produced to feed everyone in the world, why are some people hungry?

Hunger myths

Myth 1: More food / fewer people

There is already enough food grown to feed everyone in the world so hunger is not just about getting a balance between the amount of food and population. Serious food shortages still happen in some parts of the world, even when there are surpluses in other parts of the world. Food shortages occur when households and countries can't afford to buy the food that is available on the world markets.

Lack of overall economic growth is a major underlying source of deprivation. Poverty alleviation—and in the long term its elimination—is the only way to reduce the numbers of hungry people.



Myth 2: We need to give more food aid

Food aid is not a viable long-term solution for communities, although it plays a vital role in helping people survive when there are food shortages. In developed countries, if crops fail, it's possible to import food, and people or governments have enough money to buy this food. In developing countries, this is not the case. It is important to recognise though, that not everyone suffers if there are food shortages. It is the poor who starve. According to Amartya Sen, a Nobel prize-winning economist, in most situations of famine a more equal sharing of food would have prevented starvation (Sen 1999, p177).

The relationships between rich and poor countries also play a big role in whether a country experiences a famine. Sen says, "Famines are, in fact, so easy to prevent that it is amazing that they are allowed to occur at all." He believes that the psychological distance between groups of people makes it easy for wealthy countries to ignore famines when they occur (Sen 1999, p175).

Myth 3: Technology will stop hunger

Technological advances offer hope that the world's farmers will produce more food. In fact there have been such huge leaps forward in agricultural technology in the last century—including machinery, pesticides, herbicides and irrigation systems—that farmers are producing more food than ever before.

Genetic modification is the latest food technology to promise bigger harvests at lower costs. Genetically modified crops are not necessarily more resistant to pests

and diseases. Instead they are made resistant to herbicides and weedicides so that these chemicals can be applied over the crop, without damaging the crop. But not everyone benefits. Once again, people who live in poverty can't afford to buy the technology to help them to increase their food production. Genetically modified hybrid seeds cease to reproduce effectively after about five plantings, forcing the farmer to buy more seed. In future terminator seeds may be available, which will not replant at all.

Myth 4: Free trade will end hunger

Buying and selling the world's food is big business. Many developing countries depend on just a handful of commodities—such as tea, cocoa and tobacco—as their major exports. This means they are very vulnerable to the changes in the market. Prices of agricultural products fluctuate widely according to the weather, changes in demand and government policies.

The prices of unprocessed primary products have tended to decline over the last century relative to manufactured goods and only a small part of the price paid by consumers goes to the farmers. Industrialised countries including the United States and the European Union members have used tariffs, quotas and subsidies to protect their own primary producers and manufacturers against competition from other exporters. This makes it almost impossible for farmers from developing countries to compete in the marketplace. Trans-national corporations also import cheap food into the developing world so that local farmers can't compete in local markets.

What are ways to ensure everyone has enough to eat?

Food security is a fairly new technical term which describes people having enough food. It involves:

Food availability: sufficient food is available to all individuals within a country.

Food access: households and individuals have adequate resources to obtain appropriate foods. It is vital to ensure that households headed by women, children or the elderly—which are often disadvantaged in terms of land ownership, access to credit and training, etc—do not miss out.

Food utilisation: families use food to provide good nutrition—this requires knowledge about food processing, storage and preparation, as well as access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation.

Building up of assets (of the family or community): these assets might include granaries, tree nurseries or savings funds, which are used as reserves to help people survive in time of stress.



Hunger and the Millennium Development Goals

Essentially, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aim to reduce global poverty by 2015. They provide a plan for implementing the Millennium Declaration which commits the international community to create a global partnership to promote social and economic progress in all countries. The goals provide a way of measuring results and the means to fund development.

There are eight goals. They include seven related to poverty reduction: reducing extreme poverty (those living on less than US\$1 per day); achieving universal primary education; improving gender equality; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating serious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria; and ensuring environmental sustainability. The eighth goal is to create a global partnership to achieve the first seven.

The goals represent the key issues facing the developing world. The following table shows how hunger interacts with the other issues identified in the MDGs.

Hunger impacts other Millennium Development Goals (FAO 2002)

Goal	Selected indicators	Impact of hunger
Achieve universal primary education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - net enrolment ratio - literacy rate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reduces school attendance - impairs cognitive capacity
Promote gender equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ratio of girls to boys in primary education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - may reduce school attendance more for girls
Reduce child mortality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - under-five mortality rate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - associated with 60 percent of child deaths
Improve maternal health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - maternal mortality rate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - greatly increases risk of maternal death
Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - HIV prevalence among pregnant women - death rates associated with malaria 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - greater susceptibility to disease - quicker progression of the disease due to malnutrition
Ensure environmental sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - proportion of land area covered by forest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - leads to unsustainable use of forest lands and resources

Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Fogel says that hungry people cannot work their way out of poverty. He estimates that 20 percent of the population in England and France was effectively excluded from the labour force around 1790 because they were too weak and hungry to work. Improved nutrition, he calculates, accounted for about half of the economic growth in Britain and France between 1790 and 1880 (FAO 2002, p 10).

How can organisations like World Vision contribute to food security?

1. Encourage sustainable agriculture

This means helping farmers produce good crops year after year without going into debt or exhausting their land. For example, growing a variety of crops in succession, or interplanted in the same field, replaces nutrients in the soil; building terraces or stone barriers reduces soil erosion and allows rainwater to soak into the ground. Sustainable agriculture usually relies on a combination of traditional knowledge with new learning, which needs to be introduced gradually.

2. Respond to local food shortages

When a critical food shortage occurs, a rapid response is necessary. Often the country imports food, but this may not be enough to reach the people in greatest need. The United Nations calls for donor countries to pledge aid in food or cash, and non-government organisations (NGOs) like World Vision also decide how they can help by buying grain, providing transport and overseeing distribution.

Providing food aid is part of the overseas aid programme of developed countries which are major food-exporters. New Zealand contributes financially to the World Food Programme, a United Nations agency that coordinates about one-quarter of the food aid. This aid is often channelled via NGOs such as World Vision, which consult with community leaders in the affected areas. Usually, food rations are given to mothers, who are responsible for feeding the whole family.

3. Encourage other income-earning choices

For families who own no land, or live in towns, growing their own food is often not a realistic goal (although some urban families can have productive vegetable gardens). If steady jobs are also scarce, setting up a small business may be a good way to become self-reliant.

4. Support fair prices for farmers

If farmers are not paid enough for their crop, there is little incentive to produce a surplus. Even if they are, subsidies paid to farmers in the USA, Europe and Japan have prevented developing countries from competing on world markets. New Zealand has argued for freer trade in agricultural products which would mean food-producers in developing countries are less disadvantaged.

Rome Declaration on World Food Security

1996, reaffirmed at the World Food Summit 2002

“We, the Heads of State and Government... reaffirm the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger.”



Action you can take

PARTICIPATE in World Vision's 40 Hour Famine, or contribute to a community development programme. Phone 0800 800 776.

ADVOCATE for change. Sign up for a monthly World Vision email newsletter about global issues, including suggestions for actions that you can take to make a difference, at <https://worldvision.org.nz/makesomenoise/default.asp?>

EDUCATE others about food and hunger. The resources below will provide a starting place so you can learn more.

Other resources:

Find out more about trade and other poverty-related issues at http://www.worldvision.org.nz/resources/a-z_mainpage.asp

The Millenium Development Goals website is another good place to find out more about ways to reduce global poverty: www.developmentgoals.org.

ActionAid is an aid and development organisation based in the UK. One of their priorities is food rights. http://www.actionaid.org.uk/index.asp?section_id=13

Sources:

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