

World hunger: Moving the goal posts hasn't worked; what is needed is a new strategy

The world has faced an **endemic crisis of hunger and undernutrition** that has been documented as far back as the early 1970s, though the roots of hunger go back much earlier than the sudden increase in grain prices triggered by the unexpected entry of the Soviet Union into world grain markets.

In 1970, the season average price of a bushel of wheat in the US was \$1.33, by 1973, the average price had jumped to \$3.95 a bushel and world leaders became acutely aware of the issue of affordability that triggered an increase in the number of people facing hunger and undernutrition. The number of people experiencing undernutrition was pegged at 850 million.

In response, the General Assembly of the United Nations convened the World Food Conference, which was held in Rome, November 5-16, 1974, to address the issue of hunger. The conference issued the “Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition” writing, “The grave food crisis that is afflicting the peoples of the developing countries where most of the world’s hungry and ill-nourished live and where more than two thirds of the world’s population produce about one third of the world’s food...[and] acutely jeopardizes the most fundamental principles and values associated with the right to life and human dignity as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

The implicit goal was to eliminate hunger over the following decade. More than two decades later, the number of hungry stood at 825 million as world leaders convened the 1996 World Summit on Food Security. That goal of that gathering was more modest striving to “reduce by half the number of chronically undernourished people on the Earth by the year 2015.” The goal was halved, and the time frame was doubled.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) issues an annual publication, “The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World,” formerly called “The State of Food Insecurity” (SOFI). The 2019 issue reported “more than 820 million people in the world were still hungry in 2018, underscoring the immense challenge of achieving the Zero Hunger target by 2030.” It went on to note, “Considering all people in the world affected by moderate levels of food insecurity together with those who suffer from hunger, it is estimated that over 2 billion people do not have regular access to safe, nutritious, and sufficient food, including 8 percent of the population in Northern America and Europe.”

In the past, SOFI has declared progress by switching from the absolute number of people who experience a given level of food insecurity to the percentage of people who fall in this category, but the truth is that in nearly 5 decades the countries of the world have made little progress in reaching the 1974 goal of eliminating hunger in the world. The crisis is truly endemic at this point and will not change without a change in strategy.

To move forward on the issue of hunger, the general public needs easy access to a comprehensive database on hunger, similar to FAOSTAT (<https://tinyurl.com/4hey5u4f>) that tracks various measures of hunger and its impacts, including stunting, mortality, and infant mortality, over time and across all countries.

In addition, we need to recognize that free market economic theory should not trump humanitarian ethical concerns. As Harwood argued in his dissertation, aggregate food is not a “free market good.” Those who suffer from hunger and undernutrition are most often those who have been priced out of the market. They represent what economists call ineffective demand.

Food is a “coercive market good” and when someone cannot afford it the consequences can be dire.

High farm prices like we see today will add to the number of hungry in the world, but even when prices have been below the full cost of production, the number of hungry has not fallen below 500 to 800 million.

We need to establish a means for people in this category to gain access to a stable fully nutritious supply of food. A task of this scope will require government resources but may use charitable systems to aid in the distribution. Short of the direct provision of food, society can make sure that all able-bodied people have access to remunerative work sufficient to take care of themselves and their families.

Global warming will only make the hunger worse as people lose access to land and water resources. At this point in history, addressing greenhouse gas emissions is critical to our ability to end hunger in the world.

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