

We are Making Progress in Reducing Hunger and Poverty

Conference on Hunger and Poverty

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in 1990 about 790 million people in developing countries, or 20 percent of their population, were chronically undernourished. Their daily energy intake over a year was less than that required to maintain body weight and support light work activity. In the same year, approximately 180 million preschool children— 34 percent of the world's children below five years of age— were underweight, indicating malnourishment. Approximately 400 million women of childbearing age— or 45 percent of the total— have a weight below 99 pounds. This does not mean that all are malnourished (or that every woman weighing more than 99 pounds is well-nourished), but a weight this low is a readily available indicator that is more or less linked with undernutrition, and often indicates obstetric risk. This proportion varies from 62 percent in South Asia and 44 percent in South East Asia, to 21 percent for sub-Saharan Africa and 10 percent for South America. Malnutrition is most devastating for preschool children and pregnant women, but it is debilitating for peo-

ple of all ages.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that in 1991 more than two billion people worldwide were at risk from micronutrient deficiencies. The latest data show that 655 million people suffer from iodine deficiency-induced goiter; 14 million preschool children from vitamin-A deficiency-related xerophthalmia; and as many as 2150 million people, mainly women, from iron-deficiency anemia. Throughout the world, up to one billion persons suffered from learning disabilities, mental retardation, poor health, blindness, low work capacity, and premature death directly resulting from micronutrient deficiencies.

These figures, although unacceptably high, are more positive than generally assumed: Since 1975, the incidence of hunger has declined steadily. Fewer people are undernourished now than 15 years ago, notwithstanding the addition of approximately 1.1 billion persons to the developing world's population. However, this globally positive scenario masks very different regional realities. Indeed, the same data, disaggregated by geographical region, show that the 1980s were a period of stagnation and even loss in sub-Saharan Africa and South America, both of which have seen the

proportion, and the number, of undernourished people increase. South America and, to a lesser extent, sub-Saharan Africa have populations and hunger numbers that are small compared to Asia: Both China and India have more inhabitants than South America and Africa combined. Thus, on a global basis, the positive trend in Asia, and especially in China, more than compensates for the deterioration in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The latest estimate on poverty in the world is from the World Bank (1993). Using a poverty line of one U.S. dollar per person per day at 1985 prices for 86 countries, representing about 90 percent of the population of the developing countries, the Bank estimates that in 1990 about 1.133 billion people had incomes below the poverty line (about 30 percent of the population). If the 1985-90 trend continues, this number is expected to increase to 1.3 billion by the year 2000. The majority of these poor people (about 80 percent) is in rural areas of developing countries, though in Latin America a substantial proportion lives in cities. Poverty affects women disproportionately: Approximately 70 percent of the world's poor are women, by experts' estimates. □

Incidence of Hunger By Region

	sub-Saharan Africa	Near East and North Africa	Meso-America	South America	South Asia	East Asia	China	All
Proportion (%)								
1970	35	23	24	17	34	35	46	36
1975	37	17	20	15	34	32	40	33
1980	36	10	15	12	30	22	22	26
1990	37	5	14	13	24	17	16	20
Absolute numbers in millions								
1970	94	32	21	32	255	101	406	942
1975	112	26	21	32	289	101	395	976
1980	128	15	18	29	285	78	290	846
1990	175	12	20	38	277	74	189	786

Source: ACC/SCN 1992, Second report on the World Nutrition Situation: Volume I Global and Regional results; Volume II Country Trends Methods and Statistics Geneva: ACC/SCN, 1992-93.

Excerpted from Conference on Hunger and Poverty: An Overview Brussels, November 20-21, 1995. See the report on the Conference later in this issue for further information. The Conference was sponsored by the International Fund for Agricultural Development