

Global Poverty and Hunger: Challenges and Strategies for Sustainable Human Development

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ABSTRACT:

Poverty is a key aspect drawing the attention of macroeconomic analysis and global comparisons. To measure the extent of this phenomenon, a set of indicators is used to highlight, in a correlated manner, various qualitative and quantitative factors characterizing the evolution of poverty in a specific country or, more broadly, through comparative surveys at the international level. Although these indicators are not the only tools used in assessing social and economic development worldwide, they provide essential insights that enhance the relevance of such analyses.

Ultimately, the very purpose of economic activity is to promote welfare and, as far as possible, to reduce—if not eradicate—poverty. This study presents both the theoretical framework and practical methods for calculating poverty, offering a synthesis of the indicators employed in its measurement.

Keywords: development, globalization, hunger, poverty

1. Introduction

The close connection between poverty and hunger is no longer news. However, the unequal distribution of hunger worldwide is linked not only to poverty but also to politics and power (Deac et al., 2023). A striking example is India—a country with an impressive number of billionaires, yet where 200 million people still go hungry (Cerf, 2023).

At first glance, global efforts to combat hunger may appear to be a success story, as reflected in the 2023 Global Hunger Index (GHI). The average value of the index fell by 27%, indicating overall progress. Yet, improvements have not been uniform across all regions. While 14 countries have significantly improved their situations, ongoing conflicts and climate change have worsened conditions in others.

According to the 2023 GHI, the situation in seven countries is classified as “very alarming,” and in the Central African Republic as “serious.” By comparison, the 2022 GHI had classified eight countries as “serious.” Thirteen countries—including Somalia, South Sudan, and Syria—were excluded from the current analysis due to insufficient data. The report measures indicators such as malnutrition, child mortality, and stunting and wasting among children (Atangana & Oberholster, 2023).

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Poverty—affecting both developed and developing nations—remains a subject of considerable debate, despite a well-established theoretical foundation laid in the latter half of the 20th century (Awokuse & Xie, 2015). Even with substantial progress in poverty measurement and analysis, studies in Europe and globally continue to generate disputes among experts (Akombi et al., 2017).

One reason the food crisis no longer receives the same level of attention is the changing definition of hunger. In the past, hunger was primarily localized geographically; now, with globalized grain markets and efficient transport, it is less concentrated in specific regions and more prevalent among certain low-income groups (Cuesta et al., 2024).

Today's food crisis is reflected in the rise of global food prices—an increase that disproportionately affects low-income populations, pushing many below the subsistence level (Abdullajanovich, 2022).

2. The situation of poverty on a global scale

The global food crisis has translated into rising prices worldwide, disproportionately affecting low-income populations and forcing many to live below subsistence levels (Radulescu, Bran et al., 2020). Other benchmarks for determining the poverty line include insufficient income to cover the cost of essential food, clothing, heating, and other basic necessities of life (Danladi et al., 2023). Poverty also encompasses cultural deprivation, a lack of qualifications, and a rise in illiteracy.

Globally, nearly 850 million people suffer from hunger or malnutrition, including 170 million children. Every five seconds, a child under the age of five dies—amounting to around 40 million deaths annually due to malnutrition. Approximately 1.4 billion people have no access to electricity, 880 million still lack safe drinking water, and 2.6 billion lack basic sanitation facilities.

Despite a decline in extreme poverty rates, almost half of the world's population—3.4 billion people—struggle to meet basic needs, according to World Bank studies. The Bank defines extreme poverty as living on less than \$1.85 per day and aims to eradicate it by 2030. While the share of the global population in extreme poverty fell to 10% in 2015, the pace of reduction has slowed.

Economic growth has shifted a larger proportion of the world's poor into middle- and high-income countries, underscoring the need for targeted credit lines and a deeper understanding of the factors that drive poverty (Gil et al., 2019). Although the rate of extreme poverty dropped significantly from 36% in 1990, World Bank research highlights the complexity of the challenge, showing that poverty eradication efforts must go beyond purely economic measures. Access to water, sanitation, education, and energy is vital to household well-being, and poverty's burden often falls most heavily on women and children.

The report notes that the incomes of the poorest 40% have risen in 70 of 91 economies monitored, and in over half of these, their income growth has outpaced the national average, signaling progress in income redistribution (Han et al., 2020). However, shared prosperity progress has slowed in some regions, and data quality remains a major obstacle. In the least developed economies, only one in four countries, and just four of the 35

nations classified as fragile or conflict-affected, have reliable data on income distribution trends.

Measures to eradicate poverty include reducing social inequalities through fair wage and tax systems, providing high-quality education aligned with technological and economic needs, and offering targeted social assistance. However, such assistance—such as state allowances—can only have lasting effects when paired with workforce qualification and requalification programs to improve competitiveness in the labor market.

In the Republic of Moldova, 10.1% of children live in extreme poverty, with rural areas most affected, according to 2018 data from the National Bureau of Statistics.

Poverty, affecting both developed and developing countries, remains a topic of intense debate despite theoretical foundations established in the late 20th century. While significant progress has been made in measuring and analyzing poverty, research in Europe and worldwide continues to generate substantial scholarly disagreement.

3. The situation of hunger on a global scale

Famine is a phenomenon in which a large portion of a region's or country's population is so poorly nourished that death from starvation becomes common. Despite the enormous economic and technological resources of the modern world, famine still strikes many regions—particularly in developing countries where poverty prevails (Nosratabadi *et al.*, 2023).

Traditionally, famine has been associated with poor harvests caused by droughts, floods, epidemics, or supply shortages, as well as human-made factors such as war and genocide. In recent decades, however, a more nuanced understanding has emerged, linking famine to the economic and political conditions of a given region (Klarin, 2018). Humanitarian agencies assess famine severity using established hunger scales.

Corruption also plays a significant role. For example, some African countries receiving UN aid in the form of food and agricultural tools have reportedly sold these resources to neighboring states in exchange for weapons. According to Oxfam International, famine could become the "defining human tragedy of this century" as climate change disrupts seasons, destroys crops, and deepens global inequality (Larimian & Sadeghi, 2021).

Hans Herren of the IPES-Food research group notes that the current global system cannot ensure fair distribution of food. Climate change may force millions of people in hunger-stricken areas to abandon traditional crops, potentially leading to mass migrations and conflicts over resources such as water.

Global hunger and poverty remain two of the most pressing issues of the 21st century. Extreme temperatures, droughts, and floods—exacerbated by global warming—threaten food security. With the global population expected to grow by one-third by 2050, food production will need to double worldwide and increase fivefold in Africa, a continent that has never been food self-sufficient (Stanković *et al.*, 2021). Currently, 1.1 billion people live on less than one dollar per day. While life expectancy has increased in many regions due to advances in medicine, education, and nutrition, climate change is projected to significantly reduce crop yields—by about 12% for rice and wheat in China and Bangladesh by 2050.

By 2020, over 50 million people were already food insecure, a situation worsened by population growth. In Latin America, ecosystems face prolonged droughts and severe flooding, leaving over 70 million people without safe drinking water. Africa remains the most vulnerable continent, where climate change, extreme weather, and new epidemics worsen existing challenges. Ethiopia's recent drought, for example, has pushed millions deeper into food crisis.

While highly productive crops could technically feed the world, ethical concerns over untested technologies, as well as cultural and class barriers, hinder their use (Szalkowski & Johansen, 2024). Experts argue that eradicating poverty—not just providing international aid—is essential to ending hunger. For many developing nations, agricultural subsidies from donor countries and debt relief could be even more critical.

As farmland and clean water become scarcer, competition for resources will intensify, particularly between rich and poor nations. In regions like the Sahel, rapid population growth combined with shrinking arable land is already fueling conflict (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2021). Export-oriented agricultural sectors—when effectively managed—can be highly successful, leveraging low labor costs and favorable natural resources.

However, global trends suggest worsening conditions ahead. The European Central Bank reports that wheat prices rose by 91%, corn by 57%, sugar by 32%, and soybeans by 33%—driven by poor harvests in 2020, growing demand in China and India, and the diversion of crops toward biodiesel production. Such price increases threaten to trigger a major global food crisis in the coming decades.

3.1. Explaining the hunger figures

Critical updates to data for China and other highly populated countries have led to a substantial downward revision of global hunger estimates, placing the current figure at 690 million people. However, this has not altered the overall trend. An assessment of the hunger situation up to 2022 reaches the same conclusion: after decades of steady decline, chronic hunger began to rise slightly in 2020 and has continued to increase.

Asia is home to the largest number of undernourished people (381 million), followed by Africa (250 million), and then Latin America and the Caribbean (48 million).

The global prevalence of undernourishment – the proportion of the population suffering from hunger – remained nearly unchanged at 8.9%. However, the absolute number of people affected has risen since 2014. This indicates that over the past five years, hunger has increased in step with the growth of the world's population.

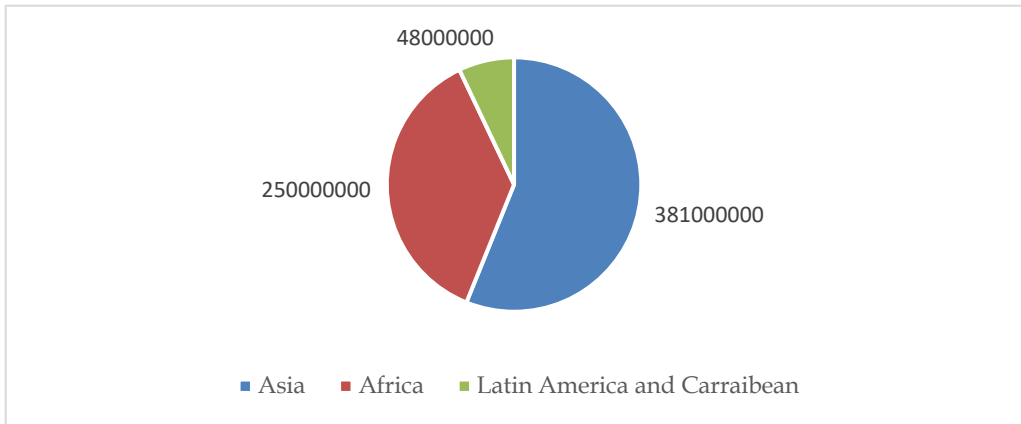


Figure 1. Malnourished people on continents. Source: World Bank

This, in turn, hides large regional disparities: in percentage terms, Africa is the region most affected and this is increasing, with 19.1% of the population affected by undernourishment.

This percent is greater than double that of Asia (8.3%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (7.4%). On modern trends, via way of means of 2030, Africa will host over 1/2 of the world's chronically hungry population.

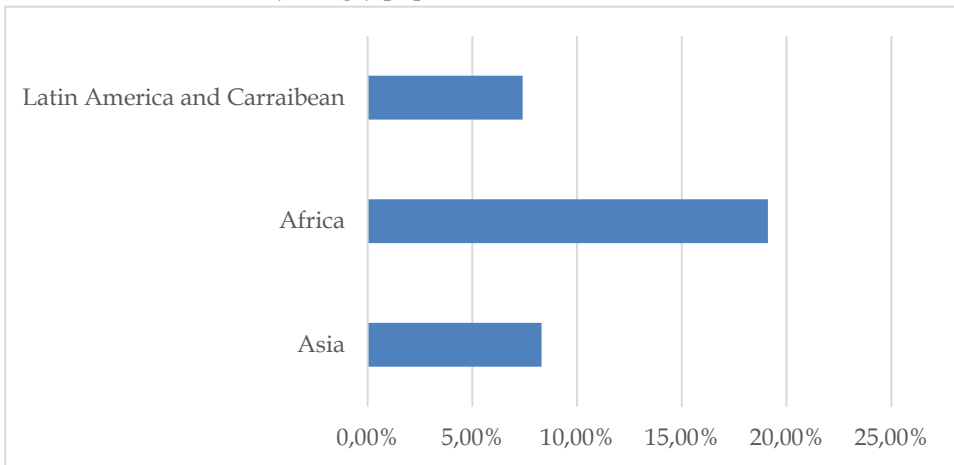


Figure 2. Affected regions. Source: World Bank

3.2. Effects of the pandemic

As progress towards ending hunger stalls, the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened existing vulnerabilities and inefficiencies within the global food system the interconnected activities and processes that influence the production, distribution, and consumption of food. The crisis has disrupted supply chains, reduced household incomes, and intensified

inequality, leaving millions more at risk of food insecurity. While it remains too early to fully measure the long-term effects of lockdowns and containment measures, early estimates suggested that at least 83 million additional people—and possibly as many as 132 million—faced hunger in 2020 as a direct consequence of the economic downturn triggered by COVID-19. Addressing hunger and malnutrition in all its forms—including undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, overweight, and obesity—requires far more than ensuring a sufficient quantity of food. Food quality and nutritional value are equally critical, especially for children in their formative years. Yet a major barrier is the high cost of nutritious foods and the resulting limited affordability of healthy diets for millions of households. This challenge is compounded by inequalities in access, inadequate infrastructure, and the lack of resilience in food systems to withstand shocks.

Conclusion

Food insecurity and hunger have been recurring challenges throughout history, often worsening during times of crisis. In the past—such as during the Great Depression—governments have expanded social protection measures to assist affected populations. Today, despite advances in agricultural productivity and global food trade, hunger remains a persistent, though sometimes less visible, reality. Many people still face the daily uncertainty of where their next meal will come from, while others lack access to diverse, nutrient-rich foods.

Governments worldwide continue to implement support programs, while research institutions, non-governmental organizations, and the media shed light on the issue, making it increasingly visible to the public. In addition to governmental action, community-based initiatives, academic institutions, and grassroots organizations are actively working to combat social stigma around food insecurity, provide direct assistance, and promote sustainable food practices.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the fragility of our food systems—not only impacting public health but also threatening food security on a global scale. By amplifying pre-existing inequalities, the crisis has shown that resilience must become a cornerstone of food policy.

To reduce the risks and impacts of food insecurity, it is essential to:

- Strengthen and expand social protection programs to safeguard vulnerable populations during economic shocks.
- Invest in resilient, inclusive, and sustainable food systems that can withstand crises and adapt to changing conditions.
- Make nutritious food more affordable through targeted subsidies, improved supply chain efficiency, and support for small-scale farmers.
- Increase public awareness through education and media campaigns that promote healthy diets and address the root causes of poverty.
- Encourage community-driven solutions that mobilize local knowledge, build solidarity, and ensure culturally appropriate approaches to nutrition.

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