

FAO REPORT

It's Chronic Hunger

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The present world hunger, historically unprecedented, has turned hungrier with the Great Financial Crisis. The Great Hunger is turning chronic worldwide as employment, income and assets diminish, as coping strategies of the poor exhaust, and as starvation follow. It now goes beyond poor countries. Now, news agencies regularly report hunger, significant in size, in the US. Amartya Sen's much-propagated "great" observation, "famines don't occur in democracies", gets nullified by the Great Hunger, virtual famines in many "democracies", integral part of the mainstream democracy, a democracy of elites and market.

Accumulation at the cost of the poor and hungry has disabled the present world system to get rid of hunger. The recent past witnessed unabated food crises. Starvation and death visited the Sahel in the 1970s and the Greater Horn of Africa in the mid-1980s. Twenty million people faced hunger in the Greater Horn of Africa. Niger experienced food crisis in 2005. The crises dominated the southern Africa in the 2001–03 and 2005. Emergency appeals for some countries are almost annual events now. Countries in Asia and Latin America were not spared. Starving poor is the universal fact.

In many parts of the world today, *The Lancet* wrote: "Therapeutic and Supplementary Feeding Centres are overstretched..." ("Economic Crisis Overshadows Food Crisis") Now, in places in this planet people have "nothing but to gather poisonous wild berries and boil for hours to remove the toxins from those. Hungry children collect food, if considered food, thrown away by well-fed persons." Widespread hunger and malnutrition are today's thorny truths. Nutritional surveys find global malnutrition at acute and severe levels as nutrition situation in countries turn critical. The most recent FAO undernourishment data covering all countries show that the trend continued into 2004–06. Malnutrition has almost doubled since 2007.

According to FAO estimates there were 1.02 billion undernourished people worldwide in 2009 representing "more hungry people than at any time since 1970 and a worsening of the unsatisfactory trends that were present even before the economic crisis." Households in substantial number were pushed back into poverty even before the world economic crisis. The State of Food Insecurity in the World Economic crises – impacts and lessons learned, the FAO 2009 report, tells: The number of hungry people increased between 1995–97 and 2004–06 in all regions except Latin America and the Caribbean. Even in this region, however, the downward trend was reversed because of the food and economic crises.

"Chronic hunger," the report said, "has been increasing since 1995–97." "[E]ven before the food and the economic crises, the number of hungry people had been increasing slowly but steadily. With the onset of these crises, however, the number of hungry people in the world increased sharply. The World Food Summit target of reducing the number of undernourished people by half ... by 2015 will not be reached if the trends that prevailed before those crises continue." Poor crop harvest is not at the root of the present increase in food insecurity. Diminishing income, increasing unemployment, and rising food prices have increased food insecurity. Food security, all people's all time physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life, is absent in poor societies.

Poor people, FAO said in the report, often spend 40 percent of their income on rice in normal times. At the end of 2008, households were spending, on average, 62 percent of their income on food, up from 52 percent in 2005. Their forced increased food budget compelled them to clip their health and education expenditures. Recent studies have found that household expenditures on key items remained lower than before the food and economic crises. This generated serious concerns about food intake, health care, debt and education. FAO's RIGA database shows that the poorest of the poor are most affected by the food crisis. The 2008 edition of the report told that the food price shocks disproportionately affected female-headed households.

A contradiction, however, reigns. The World Disaster Report 2009 informed: "Resources are available to ensure that no one, anywhere in the world, at any time, should go hungry." Authorities at different levels claim: "Considerable progress has been made in establishing food security-related early warning systems at global, regional, national and community levels." FAO also tells: Higher food prices and reduced incomes and employment mean that, even though aggregate world food availability was relatively good in 2008 and 2009, access by the poor to that food has been adversely affected.

A "big", it is relative, population is a problem, also relative, but not the only and the foremost problem related to food crisis. Economies with relatively "smaller" population and a lot of crop production are not rare whose portion of population face hunger. The number of undernourished has risen although the 1990s and the current decade have experienced slower population growth, and the proportion of undernourished increased in 2008. Food crisis is sometimes related to failures of states. The World Disaster Report, '09 wrote: "[M]any of the most serious food crises are clearly associated with a failure of states to protect, respect and fulfil the right to food. ... Poor governance may be viewed as the major underlying cause of food crises. ... Recently it has been claimed that, for diverse reasons, several governments have been unwilling to acknowledge and respond to the food crises."

The question that crops out: what is hindering materialization of the 1996 World Food Summit declaration, the Millennium Development Goals, people's right to adequate food, their fundamental right to be free from hunger, and The Hyogo Framework for Action (2005–2015)? The HFA commits signatories to the progressive reduction of risk, including the risk of malnutrition. The "right to adequate food" is enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ratified by 160 states.

Hunger in the present world, fundamentally, is man-made: related to production and distribution relations, to destruction and degradation of ecology and bio-diversity, to conflict. Economic interests ignore ecological considerations, demolish ecology and bio-diversity, and engage into conflicts, conflicts within and outside national boundaries. Complex conflicts and interaction of interests lead to food insecurity. "[T]here is growing evidence that the complexity of food crises is increasing. A rigorous analysis of several recent food crises (that were at first assumed to be largely driven by harvest failure) has revealed multiple and overlapping causes" (P. Trench, et al. Beyond any drought, Root causes of chronic vulnerability in the Sahel, June 2007.) Ecological, economic and political shocks turn into disasters that lead to hunger. Many of the disasters are predictable and avoidable. Siphoning agricultural into energy market, larger size of the later compared to world grain market, and influencing grain prices by oil prices have role in the increasing hunger.

The "glorious" globalization by capital has worsened the hunger situation. Poor countries have increasingly been financially and commercially integrated in the global markets that now design and dictate near-all aspects of life, from metropolis to dense forests, of the super-rich and of pauper, from food to feed and fodder. Food, access to modern agro-inputs, subsidies and other efforts to boost investment in agriculture, credit to credit-unworthy, all

related to agriculture and critical for wiping out hunger are not beyond the periphery of world markets. Even, coping mechanisms of the poor and safety nets for them are dependent on market, basically the global market although mechanical view tends to look at the problem from a narrow angle, either locally or within national boundary. Hunger, food crisis or difficulties to access food, and bad governance playing catalytic role in the crisis cannot jump away from the worldwide web of capital. Democracy helps fight starvation. But democracy of market, by market, and for market turns useless in fighting out hunger.

Increased production does not always ensure food availability and incomes for the poor. Democracy of availability/access remains absent in the dictatorship of market as market and democracy are opposed to each other. Technical aspects – agro-climatic monitoring; early warning; livelihood and food security indicators; managerial, financial and analytical autonomies; satellite image; etc. – depend on political-economy and politics, and these are connected to class rule. Environmental, social, organizational, economic and political indicators required to gauge and prevent hunger turn worthy or worthless tools depending on character, essentially class character, of governance. “Production-crisis”, “market crisis”, “crisis caused by long-term or by extreme poverty”, “malnutrition crisis caused by cultural practices”, “weaknesses in governance”, “population ravaged by epidemic”, “delayed response”, etc. that create/intensify hunger are dependent on economy and politics, and interact with each other in complex ways. Safety nets and services planned, designed or dreamed for the poor ultimately fall prey to forces having interests in market.

World grain market is not beyond the hands of speculation. Moreover, monopoly-finance capital’s gambling and the following outburst of crisis have affected countries: falls in export earning, remittance, aid, investment and trade. There is now limited scope to resort to instruments including currency devaluation, borrowing or increased use of official assistance to face the effects of the crisis. Resources appear scarce in fighting the food-plight despite ultra-quick availability of trillions of dollars for the financial gamblers. Ordinary people with declining or stagnant real income had to go and are going to higher food price market that aggravates “already unacceptable levels of food insecurity and poverty.”

Private investment in agriculture will decline, if rate of profit is higher in some other area as is evident in a number of poor societies having “vibrant” speculation market. “However, history tells us that there is no greater engine for driving growth and thereby reducing poverty and hunger than investing in agriculture, complemented by programmes that ensure” people’s access to food.

The State of Food Insecurity 2009 tells: “[R]ight-to-food approach has an important role to play in eradicating food insecurity. To lift themselves out of hunger, the food-insecure need control over resources, access to opportunities, and improved governance at the international, national and local levels.” The assertion is a political question and is defined and determined by politics of classes. An “economic” approach, basically political itself, isolated from economic and political power alignment, whether at macro or micro levels or simultaneously at both, can be a good topic for debate but useless in real life where class power equation determines flow of benefit other than a few “benevolent” touches, and that “benevolence” is actually to keep on the regeneration-“machine” running. To get liberated from the jaw of hunger, the food-insecures’ scope for participation in governance is also a political question which is determined by politics of contending interests, interests for accumulation and interests opposed to that. □□□