

# Hungry Millions

The world is richer than ever, producing food that could feed twice the entire global population, yet millions still suffer from malnutrition, hunger and starvation, despite commitments made by governments to reduce hunger in 1996 at the first World Food Summit and again at the Millennium Summit in 2000.

While in 1996, the number of people suffering from under-nourishment was estimated to be about 800 million people, latest estimates from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) suggest that there are now 854 million people who do not get enough to eat everyday.

In a world overflowing with riches, hunger is not inevitable. It is a violation of human rights. The right to food is a human right that protects the right of all human beings to live in dignity, free from hunger.

That only land reform is a guarantee to combat hunger is now a proven fact. In September 2006 the Bolivian Parliament adopted a groundbreaking land reform bill, to redistribute *underused* land to rural communities, especially indigenous communities. This new law states that only land that is unused or has been corruptly obtained will be used for redistribution. If properly and efficiently implemented, this law could lead to redistributing up to 20 million hectares of land, mostly to indigenous people, and to improving their livelihoods and access to food.

Venezuela has distributed more than 3 million hectares of land and provided credit to more than 3 million farmers, as part of its land reform programme. Mission Mercal, launched in 2003 is aimed at creating subsidised grocery stores through a State-run company called Mercal, to help communities to become self-sufficient by replacing food imports with products from local farmers, small businesses and cooperatives. In 2005, 11.36 million Venezuelans benefited from Mercal food programmes.

Although there has been some recent progress in reducing global levels of malnutrition the Millennium Development Goal to halve the number of underweight children by 2015 will not be met. School meal programmes are one example of measures to fulfil the right to food. But it is implemented in half-hearted manner in most third world countries, not excluding India.

A new study by the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) of the United Nations University, which shows how extreme global inequality has become, with most of the world's wealth heavily concentrated in North America. Europe and high-income Asia-Pacific countries, including Australia and Japan. People in these countries collectively hold almost 90% of the world's total wealth, while the poorer half of the world's population owns barely 1% of global wealth. This imbalance is the root cause of hunger for the third world poor. Without attacking this inequality all poverty-alleviation schemes are bound to fail.

In a world where the richer countries are getting richer and the poor ones are getting poorer, migration is an obvious response. And it's forced migration. Refugees from hunger should not be confused with other categories of so-called 'economic refugees'. "An economic refugee may be somebody who seeks a better life by voluntarily migrating to another country. The refugee from hunger does

not move voluntarily. He is forced to flee. Hunger is an immediate threat to his life, and the lives of his family. He has no choice." Today, however, most governments treat crossing international frontiers to be free from hunger as an illegal act. The reality is otherwise.

Environmental degradation, desertification and global climate change are also exacerbating destitution and desperation, especially in the highly arid countries of Sahelian Africa. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has estimated that, by 2050, there may be as many as 150 million 'environmental refugees' - people forced to leave their homes and lands for environmental reasons linked to global climate change, including desertification and land degradation.

Agricultural policies in the North are also having destructive effects on agricultural livelihoods and hunger in the South. The European Union is creating massive hunger in Africa through its agrarian dumping policies. The dumping policy of the EU is destroying African agriculture. Of the 52 countries in Africa, 37 are purely agricultural states. The way neo-liberalism is getting its steam in India agricultural dumping by America is imminent and in the end more hungry mouths in backward districts of India. Though industrialisation gets top priority on the agenda of Indian left, land reform in favour of small and marginal farmers seems to be the key in combating mass hunger. □