



## Population Growth and the Food Crisis

In 1928, Herbert Hoover promised “a chicken in every pot” as part of his presidential campaign—a promise that was not only never realized, but instead followed by the 1929 stock market crash. Since the 1930s Great Depression, the United States has not experienced widespread famine, but other nations have not been as lucky.

According to Hilary Benn, UK Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, in less arable or poorly governed parts of the world, “a perfect storm” of factors threaten global food security: rising prices, drought and other climate disasters, land shortages, and increasing demand.

With world population climbing toward 9 billion by 2050, food shortages must be attacked two-fold, addressing both the number of chickens and the number of empty pots.

### Where hunger strikes

In 2008, the United Nations (UN) Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that 963 million people—14 percent of the world’s total population—were undernourished, lacking a diet adequate to sustain an active and healthy life. At that rate, the FAO predicted that by December 2009 the number of hungry people would reach 1 billion—about three times the number living with HIV/AIDS. But in March 2009, FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf told the *Financial Times* that we had already passed the 1 billion mark, due to global economic turmoil.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, ongoing conflicts have caused the undernourished population to jump from 29 to 76 percent. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the number of hungry grew from 15 million in 1990-92 to 37 million in 2007. The World Bank estimates that an additional 44 million children will suffer permanent physical or mental impairment because of rising malnutrition last year.

FAO’s 2008 *State of Food Insecurity in*

*the World* report found that poor people in seven countries—India, China, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Ethiopia—make up 65% of the total population of undernourished people. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest proportion of undernourished people in a region, at one-third of the total population.

The burden of rising food costs falls disproportionately on the poor, who spend 50 to 70 percent of their incomes on food. Those worst affected come mainly from landless families, and especially households headed by women.

### Rising demand, higher prices

In industrialized countries, farmers have been able to increase crop production, growing cereal output by 10% in the

last year, but this has not been enough to offset the needs of poor countries that lack access to fertilizer, seeds, water, and economic markets. FAO economist Kostas Stamoulis said that “to meet these challenges without major pressures on food prices, cereal yields in developing countries will need to increase by 40 percent, irrigation water requirements will rise by up to 50 percent, and some 100-200 million hectares of additional land may be needed.”

According to a June 2009 *National Geographic* special report, from 2005 to the summer of 2008, the price of both wheat and corn tripled and the price of rice multiplied by a factor of five, causing 75 million more people to fall into poverty. While short-term shortages caused by drought or pests were responsible for price shocks in the past, the recent hikes



These four children in Cameroon are from a family of nine, born to a third wife. Many families in the rural areas of Africa are not aware of, nor do they practice, family planning. Children are born without a plan for their care, and the rest is expected to somehow fit into place. However, sometimes children take matters into their own hands, such as the children shown here, who came up with a feeding plan of their own. They are having a midday meal of kernels and roasted grasshoppers, their improvised source of fats and proteins. Photo: Nomade, Courtesy of Photoshare



Two young San girls in Namibia carry sacks of famine relief food aid received from the Dutch Reform Church. Photo: Jessica Gordon, Courtesy of Photoshare

are due to a longer-term problem: demand for food (caused in large part by population growth) is growing faster than production.

Joachim von Braun, Director General of the International Food Policy Research Institute, argued in the *National Geographic* article that agricultural productivity growth—which is only 1-2 percent per year—is too slow to keep up with population growth and increasing demand. In fact, in 2007, global carryover stocks fell to their second lowest level on record: only 61 days of global consumption.

Moreover, a growing middle class also puts strains on current food production. For countries like India and China, increasing incomes translate into increasing demand for meat and dairy products. In fact, meat consumption in China has grown by more than a third in little over a decade, though China's food production has actually decreased. While total food consumption for the world is projected to double by 2030, meat consumption is projected to double by 2020.

Currently available resources cannot sustain protein-rich diets for 7 billion (and counting) people. The New Economics Foundation (NEF) estimates that it would take five times the Earth's current resources to meet the needs of a global population consuming at a rate equivalent to that of the United States today.

### Shrinking resources threaten the world's poor

A number of strategies have successfully raised food production, most notably the Green Revolution in Mexico, India, and to some extent, the Philippines. In 2008, the World Bank and FAO-initiated study, the "International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development," found that large production increases made possible through science and technology during the last 30 years have actually not improved food security for the poorest people. The study, which spanned six years and included the arguments of about 400 international agricultural experts, called for more sustainable, environmentally friendly practices that would help small farmers around the world, instead of only big agribusiness. FAO's Diouf also advocates a "twin-track" approach that creates "measures to enable the agriculture sector to respond to the high prices, and targeted safety nets and social protection programs for the most food-insecure and vulnerable."

Climate change and other environmental damages have led to hotter climates and worsening water scarcity, both of which predictably lower crop yields. In Australia and East Africa, for instance, serious droughts have diminished harvests for the last several years. Arable land available for cultivation is becoming even

scarcer as populations grow and potential cropland is converted into roads, suburbs, and biofuel crops. According to *The Times (U.K.)*, Ethiopia has not only seen its population double since the mid-1980s, but "85 percent of the people rely on farming for a living...[P]er head, food production has actually fallen since 1984—by more than a third—and farm plots get smaller and smaller."

### Long-term solutions

The feeling of hunger is one that all humans innately, immediately recognize and understand. Tragically, for some, it is a feeling that is ever-present. "This sad reality should not be acceptable at the dawn of the 21st century," Diouf said to world leaders at a recent emergency food summit in Rome. "Not enough has been done to reduce hunger and not enough is being done to prevent more people becoming hungry."

In order to reduce the number of undernourished people on this overtaxed earth, the long-term strategy must include population stabilization. Tim Dyson, Professor of Population Studies and agriculture expert at the London School of Economics, said, "We tend to deal with what is happening now, today, tomorrow or next week. Insufficient attention is given to more fundamental processes such as population growth, or the need to invest in agriculture research for people living in difficult environments."

Agricultural innovation and heightened equality in food distribution will help reduce undernourishment and starvation. But ultimately, if we want to put a chicken in everyone's pot, the number of pots has to stop growing.

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*Population Connection is America's largest grassroots group advocating for progressive action to stabilize world population at a level that can be sustained by the Earth's resources.*