



WORLD HUNGER ON THE RISE

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As many of us head into a holiday season filled with good things to eat, the number of hungry people in the world remains high eight years after a United Nations pledge to halve world hunger.

According to the U.N. Food and Agricultural Agency (FAO), which released its annual Hunger Report Wednesday, more than 5 million children die from hunger each year -- one every five seconds.

The number of people who do not get enough to eat has increased to 852 million -- up 18 million from the 1990s, causing tremendous suffering and costing developing nations billions of dollars in lost productivity and national income.

"The number is so large that there has been relatively slow progress in bringing help and hope to the people suffering from it," said Andrew Marx, author of the 2004 report.

A good investment

But the goal of reducing hunger levels by half by 2015, first pledged at the U.N. World Food Summit in 1996, can still be reached, hunger experts say. It will cost more in the long run if hunger is not reduced now.

"Every child whose physical and mental development is stunted by hunger and malnutrition stands to lose 5 to 10 percent in lifetime earnings," FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf wrote in the forward to the report. At current levels hunger drains more than \$500 billion in hypothetical economic gains from developing countries each year.

For every dollar that's spent in stopping hunger, \$5 to \$20 in benefits are created, according to the report.

Who is hungry and why?

The FAO calculates who is hungry by estimating the average amount of food available for each person, how accessible that food is to everyone and the minimum number of calories required for an average person.

Of the estimated 852 million hungry people in the world, 815 million are in developing nations like Burundi in Africa, Venezuela in South America and Bangladesh in Asia.

About 28 million are in countries in transition such as Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, and 9 million are in industrialized nations like Germany and the United States.

Although the first half of the 1990s saw a decrease in hunger levels in developing nations, the trend has since reversed, due in large part to poverty in China and India, the world's two most populous countries.

Among the 16 countries with the highest level of hunger, all but one are in sub-Saharan Africa (south of the Sahara Desert). Many of the people suffer from food emergencies -- food shortages that require emergency assistance from agencies like the United Nations. Droughts, violent conflicts and a combination of these can cause such emergencies.

Changing economic patterns can cause hunger, too. In Latin America and Southeast Asia, giant supermarket chains are emerging that often purchase agricultural products from large growers, pushing small farmers into poverty.

"The result is that small farmers in developing countries are finding themselves increasingly marginalized," Marx said. "They are forced to sell their lands. The impact of globalization cannot be ignored."

Solutions

The FAO estimates that an investment of \$24 billion a year is necessary to reach the target of cutting in half the number of hungry people in the world.

Hartwig De Haen, who oversaw the report, said the target was "ambitious but still feasible."

To reach the goal the world community needs to take a two-track approach, the report says. Track one would increase food availability and incomes of the poor. Track two would establish programs to get food directly and quickly to the most needy -- including pregnant women, infants and children, unemployed urban youth, the elderly and sick people, including those with HIV/AIDS.

Compiled by Annie Schleicher for Online NewsHour Extra