
The 2009 Global Hunger Index: More Attention to Women's Role Needed

Joachim von Braun

Director General, International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, DC

Recent world events have hit developing countries hard. Improving opportunities for women, especially with regard to education, could significantly reduce hunger and malnutrition.

Over the past two years, the world has been facing a series of crises, including high and volatile food prices, economic recession and a financial crunch. The crises are likely to have significant and long-lasting effects, creating serious implications for global food security, financial soundness and political stability. These negative events pose the greatest risk for poor people in developing countries, many of whom were already facing hunger and struggling to survive before the crises hit. Women and children are especially vulnerable, with often dire consequences for their health and well-being.

Assessing the State of World Hunger: The Global Hunger Index

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), in conjunction with Welthungerhilfe and Concern Worldwide, have released the 2009 Global Hunger Index (GHI) report to assess the state of world hunger, identify the countries and regions where hunger and malnutrition are most severe, and draw attention to those that are most vulnerable to the international economic downturn. The index

provides a multi-dimensional picture of hunger by measuring child malnutrition, rates of child mortality and the proportion of people in a country who are undernourished.

The 2009 index shows that despite regional differences, worldwide progress in reducing hunger remains slow overall. High rates of hunger are also linked to inequalities between men and women, especially in terms of access to education and literacy.

Since 1990, the global score has fallen by only one-quarter, and 29 countries now have levels of hunger that are considered “alarming” or “extremely alarming”. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi and Eritrea have the highest levels of hunger, followed by Sierra Leone, Chad and Ethiopia, all of which have experienced war or violent civil conflict in recent years. Ethiopia, however, has made significant progress in the fight against hunger.

From a regional perspective, the GHI ranking remains distressingly high in South Asia, despite some progress in reducing hunger since 1990, and in Sub-Saharan Africa, where progress has been marginal at best. In South Asia, the high prevalence of undernourished children is largely responsible for the region's hunger ranking, while widespread undernutrition and high child



Vegetables for sale in a West African market. Source: AVRDC

mortality and HIV/AIDS rates in Sub-Saharan Africa have contributed greatly to the continent's poor score, as has political instability.

In contrast, the Near East and North Africa, South-East Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean have reduced hunger significantly, and the index rankings of the last two regions are down by more than 40% compared with 20 years ago.

Food and Financial Crises in Developing Countries

Data used in the GHI come from 2007 and earlier years (the most recent available), and thus rankings only partially account for the impact of the food crisis, and do not reflect the effects of the financial crisis. However, it is clear that after decades of steady progress in combating hunger, global malnutrition is rising as a result of recent events. Moreover, IFPRI estimates that the recession and reductions in agricultural investment could result in the malnourishment of 16 million more children by 2020, relative to a situation of continued high economic growth and

investments maintained at current levels.

Although international food prices have been declining since the price hikes in 2007–08, in many countries they are still higher than they were several years ago. If the global financial crisis and economic slowdown have eased some pressure on food prices, they have also significantly reduced purchasing power and income-earning opportunities for poor people. In developing countries, poor people often spend 50–70% of their income on food and have little capacity to adapt as prices rise and wages for unskilled labour fail to adjust accordingly. The financial crunch has lowered the real wages of workers, leading to rising unemployment and reduced household incomes. In addition, credit has been constrained and remittances from abroad – upon which many poor people rely for their livelihoods – have significantly dwindled.

Low-income countries, more integrated within world markets than in the past, are being hurt by the food and financial crises. According to the International Monetary Fund, low-income countries are particularly vulnerable to the global recession and financial shock in four areas: trade, foreign direct investment, international aid and

remittances. Different countries, however, are affected in different ways. Declining terms of trade – or a decrease in the price of exports relative to that of imports – particularly hurts commodity exporters, while Latin American countries are most severely affected by falling remittances. Countries that suffer from alarming levels of hunger are also very vulnerable to the global recession – Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo being prime examples.

Gender Inequality and the Impact on Women and Children

Women and children in developing countries are likely to suffer most from the food and financial crises. High and volatile food prices combined with lower incomes could prevent pregnant mothers, infants and children from getting the nutrition they need. When babies and young children are malnourished, they can suffer irreversible consequences in terms of their health, cognitive development and even productivity as adults.

To better assess the association between hunger and inequality, IFPRI compared the 2009 GHI rankings to the World Economic Forum's 2008 Global Gender Gap Index. The latter

measures the well-being of women relative to men by assessing economic participation and opportunity, including wage equality; educational access, attainment and literacy rates; political empowerment, such as the holding of key political posts at the national level; and health and survival, including life expectancy at birth.

South Asia scored poorly on both the GHI and Global Gender Gap Index. As gender gaps in educational attainment increase, GHI scores tend to rise as well, demonstrating once again that lack of access to education goes

hand-in-hand with hunger and malnutrition. Among the South Asian countries included in the analysis, only Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have achieved the Millennium Development Goal target of gender parity in primary and secondary

education enrolment rates, and gender inequities in literacy are also widespread in the region. In Pakistan, only 22% of girls complete primary school, compared with 47% for boys. Not surprisingly, the country has high rates of hunger and malnutrition, and is hampered by staggering inequalities between men and women.

Generally speaking, South Asian countries also had low rankings on indicators of health and survival. Moreover, rates of maternal mortality, which is closely linked to malnutrition, in the region are among the highest in the world. Women who are chronically malnourished are more likely to have difficulties during labour, and a mother's poor nutrition can directly affect the health and nutrition of her children and babies.

Sri Lanka, which scored well on both indices, is an important exception in the region. The country's success is likely to be due to effective feeding programs, emphasis on universal education and good reproductive health care, among other factors.

Unfortunately, the pattern is similar for Sub-Saharan Africa. Of those with the most severe hunger and malnutrition problems, more than half also top the charts when it comes to gender inequality. Like South Asia, the relationship between education and GHI scores is particularly strong. Less than one-quarter of all countries in Sub-Saharan Africa met the Millennium Development Goal target for gender parity in school enrolment, and as educational disparities between men and women increase, so do hunger levels. The situation is most bleak in Chad, which has the fifth-highest level of hunger globally and ranks second worldwide in terms of gender inequality. The female literacy rate in the country is a shockingly low 13%, compared with 41% for men.

Despite some serious challenges, including the country's alarmingly high HIV/AIDS rates, Botswana stands out as a success story. It has achieved two key Millennium Development Goals: reducing gender disparity in all education, and providing universal access to 10 years of basic education. Botswana has committed to improving the nutrition of its people, as demonstrated by its relatively low GHI ranking.

According to IFPRI research, women's status – meaning women's power relative to men's within both households and communities – significantly affects children's nutrition. Women

If the global financial crisis and economic slowdown have eased some pressure on food prices, they have also significantly reduced purchasing power and income-earning opportunities for poor people in developing countries.

with higher status are usually better nourished and cared for themselves, and are able to provide higher quality care for their own children. Equalising men's and women's status in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa would reduce the number of malnourished children by 13.4 and 1.7 million, respectively.

Other IFPRI studies suggest that if all mothers finished primary school, the proportion of people living below the poverty line could be reduced by up to 33% in countries that have high gender disparity. In Sub-Saharan Africa, reducing gender gaps in both schooling and in the control of agricultural resources could potentially increase agricultural productivity by 10–20%, improving household food security and reducing hunger.

The Way Forward

Given the strong relationship between hunger and gender inequality, policies that eradicate disparities between men and women, or girls and boys, particularly in education and health, are a matter of great urgency and key to reducing global hunger. Closing the gender gap

in schooling could be facilitated in part by reducing the costs that parents pay to send their daughters to school, whether through cash transfers that are conditional upon school attendance, or well-designed school feeding programs with take-home rations.

Governments should also invest in female health and nutrition. Combating chronic malnutrition is crucial not only for pregnant women and mothers but growing girls as well, whose health and well-being is important for future generations.

Research indicates that improving women's economic opportunities, political empowerment and social status can help reduce hunger and malnutrition. Legal systems should be reformed to eliminate discrimination and level the playing field, and special attention should be paid to ensuring that women have rights to property and other resources, including credit and agricultural inputs.

In short, the pathways out of poverty and hunger are clear, but action must be taken now to unleash women's potential to improve food and nutrition security for the long term benefit of their children, households and countries.

Effects of Climate Change on Agriculture

IFPRI has reported that 25 million more children will be malnourished in 2050 due to the effects of climate change. Its October study, the most comprehensive assessment of the impact of climate change on agriculture to date, compares the number of malnourished children in 2050 with and without climate change.

The study, *Climate Change, Agriculture, and Food Security: Impacts and Costs of Adaptation to 2050*, suggests that this outcome could be averted with US\$7 billion per year of additional investments in agricultural productivity to help farmers adapt to the effects of climate change. Investments are needed in agricultural research, improved irrigation and rural roads to increase market access for poor farmers. Access to safe drinking water and education for girls is also essential.

Without new technology and

adjustments by farmers, climate change will reduce irrigated wheat yields in 2050 by around 30% in developing countries compared with a zero climate change scenario. Irrigated rice yields will fall by 15%.

Even without climate change, food prices will rise, but climate change makes the problem worse. Without climate change, 2050 wheat prices will increase globally by almost 40%. With climate change, wheat prices will increase by 170–194%. The cost of rice is projected to increase by 60% without climate change, but it will go up 113–121% with climate change. Maize prices in 2050 will be more than 60% higher without climate change, but they will be 148–153% higher with climate change.

The first of its kind, this study combines climate models that project changes in rainfall and temperature and a

crop model to capture biophysical effects with IFPRI's economic model of world agriculture. The latter projects changes in the production, consumption and trade of major agricultural commodities.

The study finds that developing countries will be hit hardest by climate change and will face bigger declines in crop yields and production than industrialised countries. The negative effects of climate change are especially pronounced in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Compared with the average biophysical effects of climate change on yields in the industrialised world, the developing countries fare worse for almost all crops.

In addition to increased funding for rural development, IFPRI recommends more open agricultural trade to ensure that food will reach the poorest populations in times of crisis.