



Closer Look: Food Insecurity

What is Food Insecurity?

Food insecurity is the lack of consistent access to enough food for and active and healthy life.¹ It can be classified as transitory or chronic. **Transitory food insecurity** is short-term or temporary inability to meet one's minimum food or nutritional needs. Because the global industrial food system is interconnected with other local, national and international systems, such as political, economic, ecological and cultural structures, transitory hunger can have many causes. A sudden drop in ability to produce or import food can cause temporary food insecurity for a household, community or nation. Price shocks and other market fluctuations can also make food unavailable or unaffordable, as can decrease in or loss of income. Natural disasters and severe weather events can destroy already harvested food and arable land, decreasing a community or nation's ability to produce food into the future.

Chronic food insecurity is long-term persistent inability to meet one's minimum food or nutritional needs. Food insecurity over an extended period of time causes **undernourishment** (or chronic hunger), which has serious physiological and social ramifications. People who are undernourished do not

¹ <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/understand-food-insecurity/>

get enough calories to sustain their body's energy requirements, and the result is a permanent state of lethargy and low energy. Most people who are undernourished also suffer from **malnutrition**, meaning that they do not receive an adequate amount of nutrients for their body to grow and develop normally. Ironically, even people who are obese can be malnourished because eating unhealthy food all the time can also result in inadequate intake of necessary nutrients.

Stunted growth, vitamin deficiency, impaired immune system function and many other health problems such as goiter and anemia are all linked to chronic undernourishment and food insecurity. Slowed brain development and developmental deficiencies are also effects of chronic hunger, leading to low IQ and poor learning ability, school performance and educational attainment.

As a result, people who are chronically food insecure have lower employment rates and income, which leads to consistent situations of poverty, loss of assets and inadequate access to productive or financial resources. In general, food insecurity on national level impedes the ability of a society to function well.



Figure 1: According to the [United Nations](#), one in nine people in the world today are malnourished, and poor nutrition causes nearly 45% of deaths in children under five years old (3.1 million children) each year. Chronic food insecurity also leads to a vicious cycle of poverty and ill health that threatens social cohesion.

Causes of Food Insecurity

When we think of food insecurity or hunger, we often assume that the cause is unavailability of enough food. However, food insecurity and malnourishment are caused by many factors, only one of which is an inability to produce or access food. In fact, food insecurity is a much larger issue than our ability to produce enough food to feed everyone in the world, which, in and of itself, is doable.

The problem of food insecurity is not so much that there is not enough food produced worldwide to feed everyone sufficiently, but that access to and affordability of food is disproportionate in different parts of the world. Many people and countries around the world suffer from food insecurity because they lack money and resources to purchase enough safe and healthy food to meet population demands. Therefore, even if enough food is produced globally to meet the physiological and nutritional needs of every person in the world, this does not necessarily mean that it is accessible or affordable to everyone in the world.

In our current global industrial food system, few countries rely only on food that they produce themselves. Therefore, most nations worldwide must import (and export) foods. A nation that can neither produce nor afford to import enough food to meet its population needs is considered food insecure. According to the Food and Agricultural Organization, the majority of people who suffer from food insecurity live in the developing world (Figure 2).

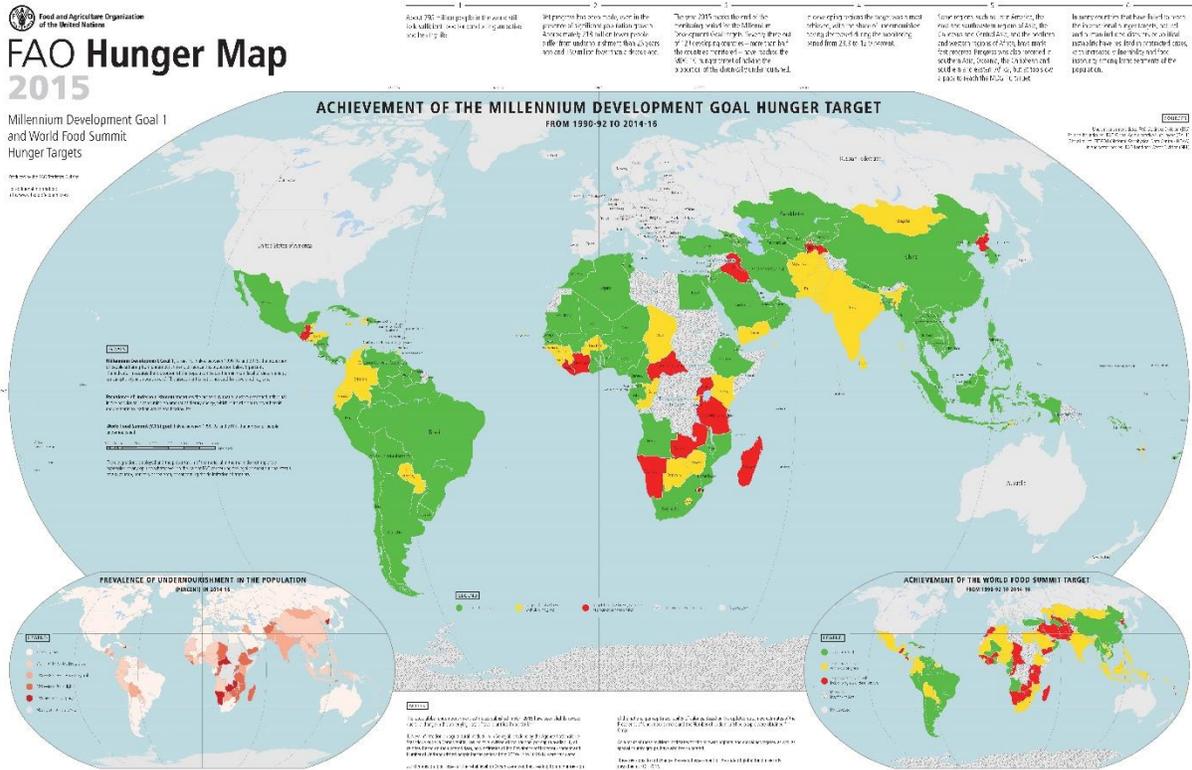


Figure 2: The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization’s Hunger Map (from 2015) shows that much of the global South suffers from problems of hunger and lack of food security, while most of the global North does not. Take a closer look at the map [here](#).

Achieving Food Security

The World Food Summit on Food Security defines **food security** as existing “when all people at all times have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” (FAO 2009) Food self-sufficiency, that is, the ability to secure food for oneself or as a nation, is an important aspect of food security.

Throughout history, various communities and societies have generally dealt with food insecurity with one solution: produce more food. However, in today’s world with our global industrial food system, simply producing more food cannot eradicate chronic food insecurity. Hunger occurs even in societies that

produce more food than is needed, as is the case currently in most developed countries where there are still millions of undernourished people despite surplus of food and resources. In many developed and affluent nations, such as the United States, *both* obesity and hunger are a problem because of this disproportionate distribution and cost of food.

Being food secure means not worrying about where you are going to get your next meal. In developed and affluent countries, most people have easy access to sufficient food for each day, and therefore, generally take food for granted in terms of its availability, affordability and variety. However, in developing and poor nations, many people spend their entire day, every day, searching for enough food and water to survive another day, and if they don't find it, they may not survive another day. Taking food for granted can create a lack of awareness in people who live in affluent nations to the injustice of food distribution and cost for other people in the world, as well as in their own communities. This lack of awareness makes it possible for people living in poverty to be exploited easily. Industrialized food systems designed to benefit a small elite group of agribusiness has exacerbated this vulnerability, causing most in the people in the world to be malnourished and starving.