

UN FAO Reports Severe Global Per-Capita Food Deficits

by Marcia Merry Baker

This year, on Oct. 16, World Food Day, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) released the latest edition of its periodic report, “The State of Food Insecurity in the World—When People Live with Hunger and Fear Starvation” (SOFI 2000). The findings estimate both how many millions are without adequate food, and where hunger is most intense. These statistics are a rebuttal to those still speaking of the mythical U.S. model of “economic boom,” or free-trade “prosperity,” or prospective benefits of globalization.

According to the report, 826 million people around the world do not get enough to eat, including 792 million in developing countries, and another 34 million in industrialized countries and in countries the UN describes as “in transition.” These statistics for people lacking food, are in the same range as what the FAO tallied in its previous survey. In 1996, the FAO made global hunger estimates, and at the World Food Summit that Autumn, encouraged nations in pledging to reduce hunger. While still paying lip service to the mythical “prosperity globaloney,” the FAO’s press release on its latest report said, “These figures represent essentially no change since the last count—a sad indictment of the world’s failure to respond adequately in a time of unprecedented plenty.”

More Free Trade, Less Food

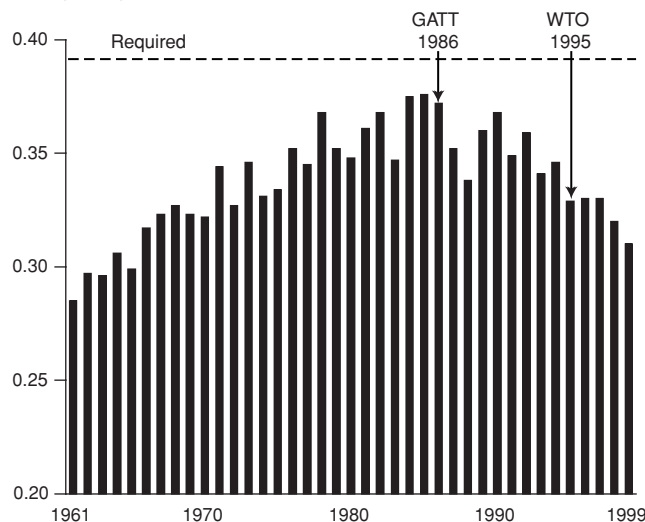
Leaving aside the FAO’s obligatory rhetoric about “plenty,” the picture is clear that the more dominant globalized free trade policies have become—as opposed to real physical economic development of nations (infrastructure, agriculture, and industry)—in recent years, the *less food per capita* has been produced. **Figure 1** shows how production of total annual world cereals (wheat, corn, rice, millet) has declined per capita. During the 1960s through the early 1970s, there was a continuing increase in grains per capita, both for direct consumption, and indirect consumption (animal protein cycles), as well as for reserve stocks, allowance for spoil-

age, aid supplies, and so on.

As of 1986, the year of the initiation of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade talks (“Uruguay Round”), and then the subsequent years of negotiations for the World Trade Organization, beginning in 1995, grain output per capita has been in decline.

The level of 40% of a ton is a reference point for what should be the minimum output per capita, to ensure sufficient quantities of cereals to meet needs. Think of 14 bushels a year, or about 850 pounds of cereals—enough for direct consumption of processed foods, plus some for indirect consump-

FIGURE 1
World Cereals Production Declines, 1961-1999
(Tons per Capita)



Sources: UN FAO, EIR.

tion (through the animal protein chain), plus additional amounts for food security.

At this rate of per-capita cereals supplies, for a world population of more than 6 billion people, there should be at least 3 billion tons of cereals annually—merely half a ton per person. In fact, there has never been more than 2 billion tons. In September this year, the FAO's *Food Outlook* report estimated that world cereals production in 2000 will be 1.881 billion tons, an increase of only 0.3% over 1999 output.

The forecast for the 2000 rice crop is for 398 million tons (milled basis), which is 1.5% less than last year's record crop. Overall, global cereals stocks are forecast to be drawn down to their lowest levels in four years, causing the stock-to-use ratio to fall below the minimum level the FAO considers necessary to ensure world food security.

This puts into perspective the fraudulent claims which U.S. grain farmers are being told, namely, that it is their "over-production" of corn and other products, that is causing a glut, and low prices. Such myths go along with the choke-hold over prices and the food chain exerted by the commodity cartel companies.

Severe Hunger in Africa

The new FAO report has also attempted to quantify the varying depths of hunger in different parts of the world. A chart is presented, titled "The Deepest Hunger," of the 23 countries showing where the undernourished (not the population as whole) have the greatest dietary energy deficit—expressed in kilocalories per person per day. This depth of hunger figure is measured by comparing the average amount of dietary energy (kilocalories) that undernourished people get from the foods they eat, with the minimum amount of dietary energy they need to maintain body weight and undertake light activity. The greater the food deficit, the greater the susceptibility to nutrition-related health risks.

In numbers, there are more chronically hungry people in Asia than in any other region, but for depth of hunger, the severity is greatest in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 19 out of 46 Sub-Saharan countries assessed in the report, the undernourished have an average food deficit of more than 300 kilocalories per person per day.

The FAO's per-capita "hunger listings" read as a forthcoming death toll. The following are some of the countries where the undernourished are suffering the most extreme average daily per-person food deficit: Somalia, 490 kilocalories; Afghanistan, 480; Haiti, 460; Mozambique, 420; Burundi, 410; Liberia, 390; Democratic Republic of Congo, 380; Sierra Leone, 380; Eritrea, 370; Niger, 350.

Hartwig de Haen, Assistant Director General of FAO's Economic and Social Department, said that the SOFI 2000 thus pinpoints groups most vulnerable to hunger. "This refining of information is an important tool for policymakers. It will allow them to move forward in a more focussed way, directing their actions and resources more precisely and effectively to the places where the need is greatest," he said.

Of course, the lack of concerted international action on hunger to date, has not resulted from lack of targeted information. Nevertheless, the new report gives stark regional specifics. In the Horn of Africa, for example, regional cycles of hunger are afflicting some 70 million people. On Oct. 27 in New York, the Horn of Africa food crisis was on the agenda of the conference of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, comprised of the heads of 26 UN organizations. In April this year, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan established an inter-agency task force to try to respond to the area's long-term food security crisis.

In the foreword to the food insecurity report, FAO Director General Dr. Jacques Diouf notes that "what we need to do is adopt more urgent, targeted measures, quickly." He called for action on four measures, including to "address conflict," which he called, "the cause of the deepest hunger in most of the poorest countries of the world." Second, Diouf said, "We must make the investments needed to build foundations for long-term sustainable growth and poverty reduction." Third, "Countries and their development partners must target the people who are suffering the deepest hunger." Last, he called for orienting "agricultural research toward improvement of agricultural commodity production."

Central Asia: 'Famine'

Among the regions of the world facing acute food shortages is Central Asia. The new FAO report highlights persistent hunger in member-nations of the Commonwealth of Independent States, where in nine out of twelve of these former Soviet countries, at least 5% of the population suffer from malnutrition. In Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Tajikistan, the level is 20% or higher. Diouf said that Armenia, Georgia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan currently have "a very serious situation." The latter two nations are located in Central Asia, which is suffering the worst drought in 75 years. The FAO report talks about "a breakdown of agricultural production and marketing systems, spiralling inflation, temporary bread shortages and, in several instances, outright conflict."

A report in the Oct. 26 London *Independent* reported on the suffering in Tajikistan, which is simultaneously experiencing armed clashes on its border with Afghanistan, and facing the prospect of a flood of Afghan refugees from the northern provinces of that country.

In southern Tajikistan, on the arid plains where the Amu Darya (Oxus) River has run dry, people expect to have to eat their seed corn just to survive the next three months, which will then leave no means to plant next year's crop. According to the UN, 3 million of Tajikistan's population of 6.2 million people "already face severe food shortages." One UN official was quoted saying, "The country will become like Somalia." Tajikistan had a developed network of pumping stations for water from the high mountain rivers during the Soviet period, but these are in disrepair. This year some farmers harvested corn crops that totalled less than the amount of seed they had planted.