

## **Facts and figures on world food insecurity and malnutrition**

### **Food insecurity stable globally, but still on the rise in Africa SDGs out of reach**

Unless efforts are redoubled and better targeted, the objective set by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of “**ending hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in all its forms by 2030 will remain out of reach**”, says the latest UN report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) [[read](#)]. Every year, this report is prepared jointly by FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO), in the framework of the monitoring process of the SDGs.

Estimates show that the food security situation only improved marginally between 2021 and 2022, reflecting uneven post-pandemic recovery across countries, the negative impact of war in Ukraine and mismanagement of the global food system leading to alarming levels of food inequality [[read](#)] and vulnerability to “shocks and disruptions arising from conflict, climate variability and extremes, and economic contraction”.

In addition to being off track in the combat against hunger and malnutrition, the world is also failing to make food systems more sustainable and to combat effectively multiple intertwined global crises (climate, biodiversity, land and water, inflation, etc.) and their impacts.

#### **Food insecurity: the figures**

In earlier articles on the global food situation, we had drawn the attention of readers on the three main ways to measure the extent of world malnutrition and we discussed the difficulties of making estimates, as well as issues around the stability and consistency of the numbers produced. This year we will limit this article to the result, inviting those readers interested by these questions to refer to what we had written in 2020 [[read](#)].

#### Moderate and severe food insecurity, as captured by surveys

The prevalence of moderate and severe food insecurity is measured on the basis of large national surveys using the [Food Insecurity Experience Scale](#) (FIES) introduced by FAO in 2014 and adopted by 59 countries covering more than a quarter of the world population, complemented by results of the [Gallup® World Poll](#) (GWP). The principle here is to ask people about their experience.

The estimates over the years during which the surveys were conducted show that, after a period of serious deterioration, the food security situation has been relatively stable globally in 2021/2022, but that a growing number of people have yet been experiencing moderate and acute food insecurity in Asia and Africa, as well as in a part of Europe.

Food insecurity strongly increased during the pandemic, and reached a plateau after 2020 (**Figure 1**).

Regarding acute food insecurity, there has been a slight decrease between 2021 and 2022, mostly in Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, while it still increased in Africa or was stable in Northern America and Europe.

**Table 1** below shows that nearly one person out of 9 in the world - **901 million** - declared having suffered from **severe** food insecurity in 2022. This proportion was **almost one person out of five in Africa** (343 million people) and close to **one out of ten in Asia** (457 million people). Women were slightly more affected than men.

In Africa, the number of people experiencing severe food insecurity increased by 12 million between 2021 and 2022. The share of people concerned grew in all sub-regions of the continent, but in Eastern Africa. In Asia, Southern and to a lesser extent Western Asia are the sub-regions where the prevalence of severe food insecurity was highest. In Latin America, prevalence decreased, while in the Caribbean, it rose. In Europe, the number of severely food insecure increased very strongly in Easter Europe (linked to the war in Ukraine, country where it doubled) and fell elsewhere, while it grew slightly in North America.

The increase between 2019 and 2022 is of 181 million people, mostly in Asia (44% of the total) and in Africa (41% of the total).

**Table 1: Evolution of the number of people having experienced severe food insecurity (in millions) (2015-2022)**

Region	2015	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022	Variation (2022-2019)
Africa	206	252	268	305	331	343	74,7
Asia	294	295	377	450	486	457	79,6
Latin America & Caribbean	45	62	63	82	91	83	20,9
Oceania	1	2	2	1	2	2	-0,2
Northern America & Europe	15	13	10	13	17	17	6,2
<b>World</b>	<b>562</b>	<b>624</b>	<b>720</b>	<b>851</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>901</b>	<b>181,2</b>

Source: [FAO](#)

**Table 2** shows an incredible figure of more than **2.3 billion people** who experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in the world in 2022 (almost 1 person out of 3). This proportion was of nearly **one out of two persons in Africa** (868 million) and close to **one out of four in Asia** (1.15 billion people).

**Table 2: Evolution of the number of people having experienced severe and moderate food insecurity (in millions) (2015-2022)**

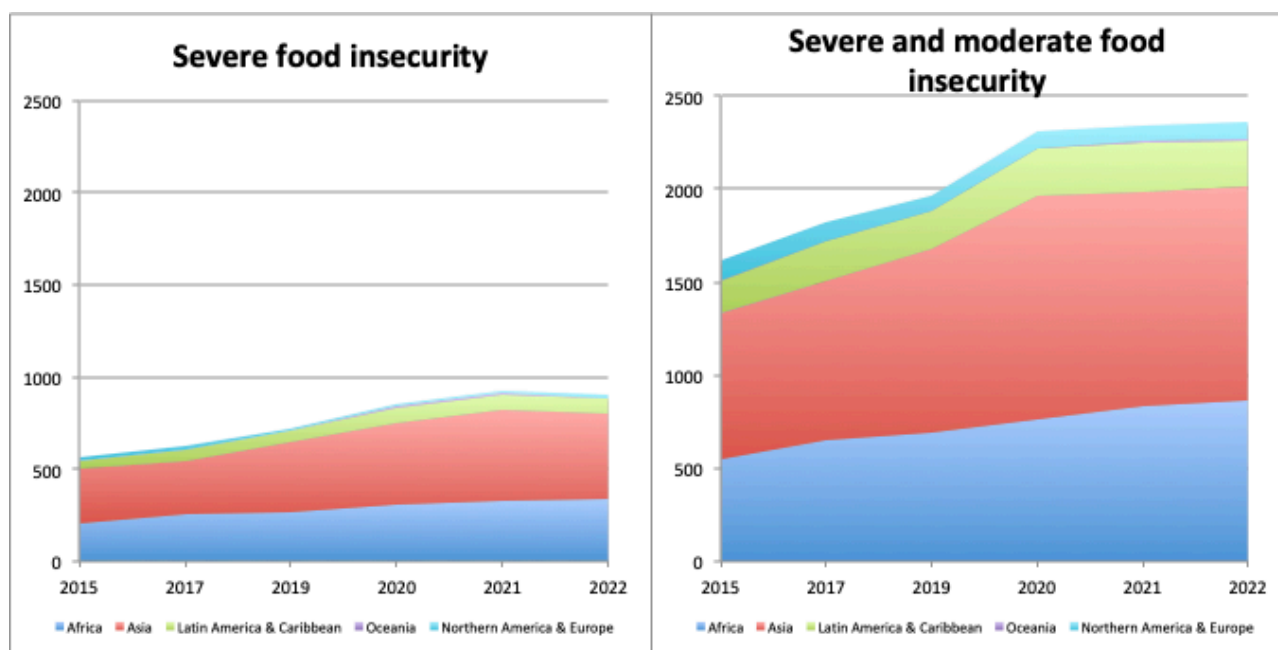
Region	2015	2017	2019	2020	2021	2022	Variation (2022-2019)
Africa	545	651	695	762	835	868	173,3
Asia	791	857	982	1197	1152	1145	163,1
Latin America & Caribbean	170	210	204	256	264	248	44,0
Oceania	4	6	6	5	6	6	0,0
Northern America & Europe	103	93	80	87	86	90	10,2
<b>World</b>	<b>1612</b>	<b>1817</b>	<b>1966</b>	<b>2307</b>	<b>2343</b>	<b>2357</b>	<b>390,6</b>

Source: [FAO](#)

The very high jump in the number of food insecure after 2019 can clearly be linked to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic that have been highlighted on [hungerexplained.org](https://hungerexplained.org) since early 2020 [read [here](#) and [here](#)], even though the pandemic is not the only explanation but rather an accelerator of past trends resulting from weaknesses of food systems, as is illustrated by the fact that the prevalence of food insecurity experience has been growing throughout the period 2015-2022. The food price rise observed from 2020 onwards can be considered as one of the causes of prevalent food insecurity. While the war in Ukraine played its part after April 2021, the earlier price hike can be put on the account of the leap of fossil energies (oil and gas) prices when China's economy recovered after the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. This hike was a consequence of the period of low investments in the oil sector that followed the oil price drop seen after 2014. Higher energy prices caused higher production costs in agriculture (more expensive fertilizer and fuel) and they boosted the use of food commodities for manufacturing agrofuels, particularly in the US and the EU. In the EU, for instance, around 11 million tonnes of vegetable oil (equivalent to 45% of the total use of vegetable oil in the Union) were being used as fuel [read pp. 8-9].

Between 2019 and 2022, more than 180 million additional people experienced severe food insecurity, while another 170 million more people were exposed to moderate food security, amplifying a trend that had already been observed earlier. In Europe and North America, the increase seen was of 70% and in the Latin American and Caribbean region, it was of slightly more than 30% (**Figure 1 illustrates this evolution**).

**Figure 1: Evolution of severe and moderate food insecurity in the regions (in millions) (2015-2022)**



Source: [FAO](#) data

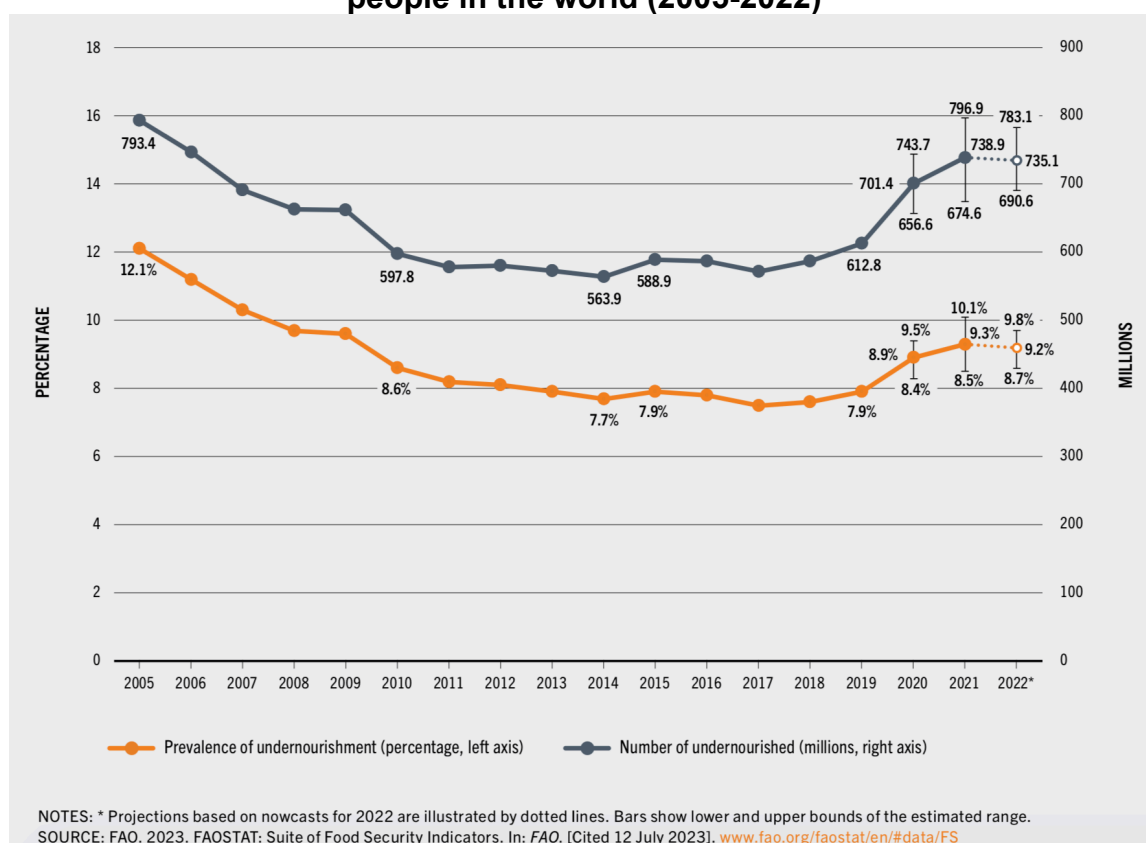
## Estimates of the number of people suffering from chronic undernourishment

Statistics on chronic undernourishment<sup>1</sup> have been produced for several decades by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) through the publication, since 1999 of its flagship report, SOFI (see the [first SOFI of 1999](#)).

In July 2023 the latest of this series of SOFI reports displays data estimates that suggest that there were between **690 and 783 million chronically undernourished people in the world in 2022**, equivalent to 9-10% of total world population<sup>2</sup> (**Figure 2**).

In 2022, around 55% the world's undernourished were found in Asia (402 million) and more than one third in Africa (282 million). Compared with 2015, about 92 million more people were affected by hunger in 2022 in Africa, 44 million more in Asia, and over 10 million more in Latin America and the Caribbean. These figures are consistent with movement observed in the above data drawn from the FIES survey.

**Figure 2: Evolution of the number and percentage of chronically undernourished people in the world (2005-2022)**



Source: [FAO](#)

<sup>1</sup> Chronically undernourished people are unable to meet their minimum food requirements over a sustained period of time. This is fundamentally different from those people who suffer from a transitory undernourishment that may occur as a short term or temporary situation. [[FAO](#)]

<sup>2</sup> These figures are estimated for individual countries on the basis of a computation that uses as inputs (i) dietary energy consumption per person that is derived from production, trade and population statistics; (ii) the coefficient of variation of this consumption based on results of past household surveys or derived from a statistical model, and; (iii) the average minimum individual dietary energy requirement at a certain level of activity, based on the age and sex structure of the population. The methodological details are provided in Annex 1B of the [report SOFI 2021](#).

The total estimated number of undernourished in 2022 is roughly equivalent to the number in 2006 (see **Figure 2** above), illustrating a lost decade-and-a-half in the combat against food insecurity and undernourishment, despite a general commitment (in words) to the UN's [Sustainable Development Goals](#), and the launching of several initiatives aiming at eradicating hunger.

This is no surprise, considering the type of food and agricultural policies and strategies that are being implemented, particularly in Africa [\[read\]](#), and the frequent - if not general - inconsistency observed between government policy commitments and statements, on the one hand, and their actual action, on the other [\[read pp. 4 to 6\]](#).

**Table 3: Estimates of the number of undernourished people in the world  
(in millions) (2005-2022)**

Region	2005	2010	2015	2022	Variation (from 2015 to 2022)
Africa	178,2	159,2	189,6	281,6	92,0
Asia	551,9	392,8	357,8	401,6	43,8
Latin America and the Caribbean	51,9	36,7	32,9	43,2	10,3
Oceania	2,3	2,4	2,5	3,2	0,7
Northern America and Europe	n.r.	n.r.	n.r.	n.r.	-
<b>World</b>	<b>793,4</b>	<b>597,8</b>	<b>588,9</b>	<b>735,1</b>	<b>146,2</b>

Note: Figures do not add up.  
2022 figures are projected values.

Source: [FAO](#)

To the explanatory factors given by the UN (war, climate change and economic downturn), one should therefore add the economic policy measures, particularly in the area of food and agriculture, adopted by countries often under the influence of international organizations, especially financial organizations, large multinational companies and other powerful lobbies (Box) [\[read\]](#).

In Africa, government policies and programmes, as well as private sector- and donor-led initiatives such as [AGRA](#) have contributed to further marginalize poor farmers by supporting large private investments frequently under the control of powerful financial operators, the penetration of multinationals in input markets (seeds, fertilizer and pesticides) and an unregulated digitalization of agriculture [\[read\]](#). As a consequence small peasants are being deprived of their land to the benefit of private investors or excluded from agricultural development programmes [\[read\]](#), and large multinationals and financial investors are collecting profits, including by siphoning off government subsidies [\[read\]](#).

Regrettably, there is as yet no serious discussion among national or regional decision makers on the validity of these policies with respect to the attainment of the hunger eradication goal. The main concern, for them, remains to produce more, whatever the resulting social or environmental impact may be. The way production is taking place does not matter, as long as output increases quickly, even if growth is not sustainable in the longer term! This idea is still well rooted in the mind of policy-makers, even if consequences of this stance means more hunger, more rural urban migration and greater exclusion of large parts of the rural population.

## The causes of hunger and malnutrition

As has been usual in the SOFI series presented by the UN, the list of [causes hunger](#) and malnutrition resulting from the “weaknesses” of food systems - conflicts, climate variability and extremes, economic slowdowns and downturns, high income inequality, low productivity and inefficient food supply chains, unaffordability of healthy diets - is suggested without pointing at the fact that these are the consequences of underlying **human decisions**, resulting from a specific balance of power and which are the real root causes of the persistence of these “weaknesses” over decades.

Conflicts are human made, climate change is due to the extraordinary boom of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions resulting from the massive use of fossil fuels by humans [\[read\]](#), and economic slowdowns and downturns are an effect of the rules and policy decisions that governments have made to manage the economy, The same applies regarding income inequality and poverty [\[read\]](#). As for low productivity and inefficient food supply chains, they too are the consequence of technological and organizational choices made by mankind over the last century, and they are everything but “natural” or “inescapable” [\[read\]](#).

It is essential to point at this here from the start, to avoid proposing solutions to hunger and malnutrition that will only scratch the surface of the problems to be solved and merely alleviate in part the negative effect of fundamental choices made.

Unfortunately, this is largely what the SOFI reports do by advocating mitigating measures such as social protection to help families during conflicts, insurance and finance against extreme climatic events, cash support to vulnerable groups in case of crisis that either seem unfeasible because unrealistic (can social protection really be implemented when a conflict situation weakens the state apparatus?) or a relief that is evidently useful but does not address the true causes of the problem. Moreover, they are based on the dangerous belief that everything can be fixed with money, without modifying the real economy and its processes. We, on [hungerexplained.org](#), have on several occasions provided a critical view of these recommendations.

It is true that, some problems can be mitigated immediately through financial means without having to wait for the root causes to be resolved and for profound changes to be enacted [\[read\]](#). This should then, of course, be done without delay. But it does not exempt the world from simultaneously designing deep reforms [\[read\]](#) and implement them to avoid having to mobilize emergency relief again and again, while the economy continues to generate suffering for hundreds of millions of people.

Indeed, it is unrealistic to believe that it is possible to eradicate hunger and food inequalities without addressing other fundamental inequalities in our societies [\[read\]](#).

### Some more data on undernourishment

- An estimated **148 million children** under five years of age (22% of the total) across the world suffered from stunted growth (low value of height for age) in 2022. Progress has been made since 2000 when prevalence was 30%, but the world is not on track to bring it down to the target of 13.5% by 2030;
- **45 million children** under five in the world were affected by wasting (weight too low for height) in 2022. That is twice the target fixed for 2030! Roughly half lived in Southern Asia and one quarter in Sub-Saharan Africa. Not surprisingly, they are mostly found in poor households.



## Conclusion

The latest UN data on food security leave little hope of achieving SDGs by 2030. A real “miracle” would be required to bring down poverty, the main fundamental cause of food insecurity [\[read\]](#). The data clearly show that food insecurity and hunger are not decreasing worldwide, as a result of the combined effect of the mismanagement of the global food system, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

The world is off track in the combat against malnutrition, as it is off track in making our food systems more sustainable and combatting climate change and its impact. In the likely absence of a “miracle”, genuine commitment of governments could possibly turn around this worrying trend.

At [hungerexplained.org](https://hungerexplained.org), we think that unless policies followed by countries are fundamentally modified in a way that we have suggested on several occasions on this site<sup>3</sup>, one can only expect that the degradation observed will continue in the future, along with its huge attached human cost in terms of lost lives and suffering.

Some believe that the solution can be found in the combination of pro-growth policies - even if they are exclusive and develop inequality - and social protection and education measures. In fact, when this approach is implemented, social protection is often used as a cover-up for the most violent anti-social economic policies. This, in our view, is not acceptable: root causes of poverty and inequality must be tackled, within food systems as well in society more broadly.

While social protection and education measures are indispensable and, if well designed, it is true, can contribute to creating more capacity for the poor to graduate out of poverty and food insecurity, they can only be effective if overall and sectoral economic policies (particularly but not exclusively in the food and agricultural sector) are conducive and offer opportunities for the poor to improve their living by a fairly remunerated work so as to have access to healthy diets. Social protection alone does, however, not constitute a sustainable way for eradicating malnutrition, and a solution has to be found in a manner that the environment is preserved (biodiversity, water and land resources, climate) by developing and promoting food production technologies that are sustainable and accessible to the poorest.

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(August 2023)

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For more information:

- FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, [The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023](#). Urbanization, agrifood systems transformation and healthy diets across the rural–urban continuum. Rome, FAO, 2023.
- FAO, [Voices of the Hungry - The Food Insecurity Experience Scale](#). Website.

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<sup>3</sup> See in particular: [Policies for a transition towards more sustainable and climate friendly food systems](#) 2018, [Climate is changing - Food and Agriculture must too - Towards a “new food and agricultural revolution”](#) 2016, and [Seven principles for ending hunger sustainably](#), 2013.

Earlier articles on [hungerexplained.org](http://hungerexplained.org) related to the topic:

- [Inequality in food systems - Is it realistic to believe that food systems could become more equal in an unequal society?](#) 2023.
- [The “food and agricultural transition” is ongoing Nine changes tell us to what kind of world it is leading us](#), 2023.
- [Ukraine war and food crisis: facts and debates](#), 2022.
- Opinions: [Sanctions Now Weapons of Mass Starvation](#) by Anis Chowdhury and Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2022.
- [COVID-19 and food crisis: the main operating mechanisms](#), 2020.
- [Why famines in a world of plenty?](#) 2017.

and all our articles under “[World Hunger](#)” category.

Archives on the world food situation :

- [Facts and figures on world food insecurity and malnutrition](#) - Food insecurity is on the rise, a consequence of the current food crisis, 2022.
- [Facts and figures on world food insecurity and malnutrition](#) -The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic 2021.
- [Facts and figures on world food insecurity](#) - An alarming deterioration, 2020.
- [Facts and figures on world malnutrition](#), 2019.
- [Facts and figures on world malnutrition](#), 2018.
- [Facts and figures on world hunger 2017](#).
- [Facts and figures on world hunger 2015](#).
- [Facts and figures on world hunger 2014](#).
- [Our comments on SOFI 2013](#), 2013.
- [Facts and figures on world hunger 2013](#).
- [What is the real number of hungry people in the world?](#), 2013.