

# Food Security Around the World: *A Guide to Who's Hungry and Why*

*from the U.S. Committee for World Food Day*

## Asia

A period of rapid economic growth has resulted in major gains in food security across most of Asia and the Pacific. Cambodia led the way while China, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Vietnam also showed strong reductions. Undernourishment increased only in Mongolia and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

### *Cambodia: Reaping the Dividends of Peace*

More land is being farmed, more food is being produced, and far fewer people are going hungry in Cambodia as the country rebounds from decades of conflict. There is more pork, beef, and poultry production and more rice yields. Cambodians' average food intake in 1996 is still scarcely enough to meet the minimum daily requirement and more than one-third of all households fall below the poverty line. Programs to remove landmines and rehabilitate irrigation systems are continuing after decades of war have left them in ruins, as well as a program being created to reduce poverty by creating jobs for vulnerable groups.

### *DPR Korea: A Bitter Harvest*

The floods, drought, and collapse of its trading relationships have devastated food production in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Total cereal production plummeted to less than half its 1980 level, while the proportion of undernourished people soared to almost half the population. Rapid economic deterioration left the country without the means to finance needed food imports. As crops failed and imports dwindled, rations were cut drastically by the national public distribution system. Gains in food production were achieved through high-input agriculture. But two years of heavy storms and flooding followed by a severe drought devastated large tracts of agricultural land. The country is now trying to revive agricultural production with improved seed varieties, double-cropping methods, rehabilitating irrigation systems and improving soil fertility.

## Latin America and the Caribbean

In most South American countries, levels are low or rapidly declining, but in Central America, levels are increasing in

several countries with Honduras registering the strongest gains. In the Caribbean, Cuba, like its island neighbors, has experienced increases in undernourishment since 1980.

### *Honduras: Economic Growth Helps to Reduce Hunger*

Steady economic growth and an effective aid program has helped Honduras to reduce the number of undernourished by almost one-third. Increases in food production, imports, and use of stock have all contributed to this decrease. Maize production nearly doubled, and vegetable oils, sugar, meat, and beans accounted for most of the increase in food intake.

Safe water now reaches 87 percent of the people, and the literacy rate is at 70 percent. The Honduran Social Investment Fund provides direct aid, and a ration program supplies coupons to help schoolchildren, mothers, and elderly people buy food and other necessities.

Still, half of the Honduran population lives in rural areas, with 40 percent in extreme poverty, and many working as agricultural laborers on large estates. Commercial agriculture offers

good possibilities for growth, but the benefits must be distributed more equally.

### *Cuba: Loss of Trading Partner Erodes Food Security*

The end of Cuba's trading relationship with the former Soviet Union has dropped the daily food intake by more than 500 calories per person because of a steep decline in food imports. This decline has increased the number of people relying on subsidies while reducing productivity and food intake for many workers and their families. Continued restrictions on trade with the United States add to the country's economic difficulties.

Despite its recent problems, Cuba has succeeded in reducing undernourishment to very low levels while relying on trade for more than half of its food. More than half the country's roads are paved and 95 percent of the population have access to safe water. The Cuban government has given priority to increasing food production and restructuring industry, but the transition process is far from complete.

## Near East and North Africa

This region accounts for ten of the 14 developing countries where undernourishment affects less than five percent of the population. Morocco's decline represented the best progress among this group of good performers. Significant increases occurred only in Afghanistan and Iraq.

### *Morocco: Thriving Economy Boosts Food Security*

Mineral wealth and an established position as a trade and commerce center has allowed Morocco to enjoy a reduction from ten percent to five percent of those undernourished. Between 1980 and 1996, daily food intake increased from 2,723 to 3,186 calories, from increases in food production and trade, reaching levels comparable with industrialized countries. Production of cereals and potatoes has more than doubled.

Improvements in transportation, sanitation, and education have occurred in the cities, but half of the population remains in rural areas where poverty and

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## Who's Hungry and Why, *continued*

vulnerability persist. Barely half of the population has access to safe water, 56 percent remains illiterate, and 61 percent of the land is severely degraded. More sustainable agricultural practices need to be introduced, and urban jobs and income must be generated.

### *Afghanistan: War Leaves Little Ground for Crops*

As a result of returning refugees, the population of Afghanistan swelled by 25 percent, and average daily food intake fell from 2,186 to 1,710 calories, significantly below minimum requirements. Two-thirds of the country's provinces are now food-deficit areas, and more than 40 percent of the country's arable land is riddled with landmines. Only 15 percent of the population has access to safe water and 70 percent is illiterate. Every day, mine blasts kill or maim 10 people—a third of whom are women and children—leaving survivors dependent on family members.

Large volumes of food aid remain far from sufficient to satisfy the minimum needs of such a large number of undernourished people. Until peace is restored, there can be little hope of any lasting solutions.

### **West Africa**

Eight countries in West Africa reduced hunger significantly between 1980 and 1996, along with the five countries worldwide that scored the greatest gains. But in Central, East and Southern Africa, 13 countries showed large increases with Burundi suffering the largest increase rising 38 to 63 percent in the same time period.

—compiled from "Feeding Minds," an educational project of the U.S. Committee for World Food Day, by Seeds of Hope intern Kimmy Scott. For more information, see [www.worldfoodday.com](http://www.worldfoodday.com).

### **Ghana: Economic Growth Fuels Rapid Gains**

A strong economy and increases in food crops caused Ghana's average food intake to soar from 1,790 calories per day to more than 2,600 calories. The gains came entirely from the betterments in the yields of cassava, yams, maize, and rice. The economy grew at an annual rate of 2.3 percent, leading to improvements in sanitation, health, and education. The population with access to safe water increased to 65 percent and illiteracy was reduced to 36 percent. Almost one-third of Ghana's population still remains poor, and ten percent live in extreme poverty, in rural areas where food insecurity and vulnerability persist. Continued economic growth and increased opportunities for off-farm employment will be crucial to maintain progress.

### **Burundi: Population Growth and Conflict**

Undernourishment has increased sharply and food production has fallen as Burundi struggles to cope with rapid population growth, severe land degradation and civil conflict. Average daily food intake tumbled from 2,020 to 1,669 calories, far below minimum requirements. Production of cassava, sweet potatoes and beans have declined. Burundi's weak economy and geographic isolation have left more than 90 percent of the people living in rural areas almost completely dependent on domestic food production. Poorly developed transport and marketing facilities and civil conflict has disrupted production and further restricted trade opportunities. The spiral of population growth, environmental degradation, and falling agricultural productivity, shows that solutions to Burundi's food security problems must be found outside agriculture.

## **The ABCs of Responding to Hunger**

*The many biblical mandates to care for poor and helpless people do not seem to be optional, but what can the average Christian do in the face of such overwhelming need?*

### **A. Anchor Yourself in Prayer.**

After you have become aware of hunger issues and the biblical call to respond to them, the first thing you should do is **pray and/or meditate**. Pray for hungry people and for those who labor to help them. Spend time in silence to center yourself and allow God to lead. Make sure that your personal and corporate worship times always include a remembrance of poor and hungry people. (See "C" for resources that will enhance this kind of worship.)

### **B. Be Knowledgeable about Hunger Issues.**

Stay informed about where hunger and poverty exist and what people are doing to heal them. Find sources who can help you stay on top of hunger realities around the world. Read the newspaper; watch television news. Find a periodical that deals with hunger and justice issues. *Sojourners*, *The Other Side*, and *Hunger News & Hope* (a Seeds of Hope publication) all cover these issues.

### **C. Challenge the People Around You.**

Keep those around you—particularly your faith community—informed. Share the resources above with your congregation. Get your church to subscribe to Seeds of Hope worship resources—and make sure the various materials get to the persons who could use them most. Arrange for a group tour of your local shelter or soup kitchen. Invite speakers on hunger issues to your church.

### **D. Develop an Understanding of Public Policy.**

Even though many of us abhor the idea, we must all at least be aware of public policy. Systemic injustice and destructive policies can undo in one moment all of the good work that thousands of people do at soup kitchens and feeding programs every day for years. Christian lobby groups like Bread for the World can help you understand the political ramifications of hunger issues—in light of biblical teachings. They can also teach you to communicate effectively with your elected representatives. Contact Bread for the World at 1100 Wayne Avenue Suite 1000, Silver Spring, MD 20910; 301/608-2400. Ask about their Covenant Churches program and the annual Offering of Letters campaign.

### **E. Explore Individual Service Opportunities.**

This is absolutely crucial. We must each get involved on a personal, individual level. Check out your local feeding programs, shelters, soup kitchens, and similar organizations for the place that fits your talents and interests. Establishing and maintaining actual, personal contact with poor people is vital to our spiritual health.

Once you've done these things, you've made a significant beginning toward a meaningful response to the presence of hunger in your world.—from Seeds of Hope