



Real Estate
Sales
page 20

THE ZEPHYR

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GALESBURG, ILLINOIS

VOLUME 21, NUMBER 27

TIGER'S SHORTEST DRIVE

DECEMBER 3, 2009

Hunger in 2009? Seriously

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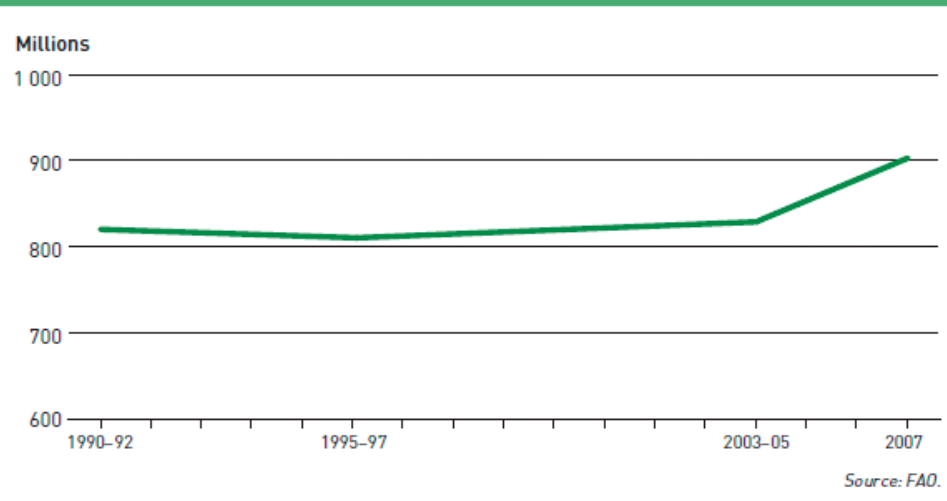
Note: This is a three part series that will provide an extensive overview of the critical issues concerning food and hunger globally, nationally, and locally. Part I focuses on the resurgence of the global epidemic of hunger and increased concerns nationally as well. Parts II and III will bring the issue closer to home and explore possible solutions.

Where did all the bloated bellies go? Apparently, based on the lack of television coverage, humans are no longer starving. But that's T.V. for you. Reality tells a very different story. In fact, current human hunger is probably as serious as it has ever been. And worse, it is happening in places where many wouldn't expect to find it (i.e., right under our nose). Paradoxically, during a time when more food is produced than ever before, we find global hunger climbing (see graphs). Given the seriousness of the problem, we have to take a careful look at why hunger is so prevalent and consider ways we can respond to it.

The scourge of hunger is definitely alive. According to Jacques Diouf, the head of the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), "every six seconds a child dies of hunger." If this isn't bad enough, based on FAO's most up-to-date estimate, over one billion people are now malnourished (i.e., lacking sufficient calories and/or protein). Over 60 percent of these unfortunate people are in Asian and Pacific countries and most of the remainder are in Africa. However, astonishingly, at least 15 million are in the richer countries.

In fact, hunger is increasing substantially in the United States as well. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) own data reveals that 17.3 million people (and 5.7 percent of households) in the "richest nation in the world" are now categorized as having "very low" food security—which equates to "disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake." (Isn't it typical

Numbers of undernourished people in the developing world, 1990-92 to 2007



for government agencies to avoid calling something what it really is—i.e., hunger?) Of these hungry people, 27 percent of the adults report having not eaten "for a whole day because there was not enough money for food" (USDA). The economy is certainly playing a role as the current levels of hunger represent an increase of over 40 percent in the past two years. However, even before the economic "crisis," over twelve million of our countrymen were hungry. This is a clear condemnation of our nation's economic policies and our collective generosity. While we spend hundreds of billions overseas, we don't have the willingness or the compassion to make sure our own citizens get enough to eat.

The effects of this hunger go beyond mere deaths, though deaths alone amount to millions per year. Chronic hunger isn't something most of us can imagine. However, for those that suffer from it, the pangs are real and the side effects catastrophic. When one doesn't get the required calories or nutrients, one's body becomes much more vulnerable to the debilitating effects of other diseases, such as diarrhea, respiratory illnesses, and malaria. Thus, though few die from outright starvation, millions do die from diseases that

they would be able to avoid (or successfully fight off) if they had been properly nourished. Besides suffering endlessly, experts suggest that malnourished children are sick much of the year, and also have stunted growth. Amazingly, approximately every one-in-three children from developing countries are affected by stunting, which is associated with learning disabilities and

blindness later in life. So, even if food is eventually provided to these children, many will exhibit lifelong challenges because of neglect early on. In the United States, periodic hunger is associated higher rates of psychosocial dysfunction (Kleinman), which may explain some of the problems that teachers now observe in school.

And in addition to being hungry, many of our neighbors have poor diets, filled with excess amounts of high fructose corn syrup, partially hydrogenated oils, sugar, and saturated fats. While the consumption of these foods constitutes poor choices on the consumer's part, a great deal of it has to do with how cheap these processed foods are and people's general inability to afford or access (as food markets close) nutrient-rich, fresh food. The health consequences of eating unhealthy foods are substantial—just consider the growing epidemic of type-II diabetes (in adults and children) as well as heart disease. Thus, not only are too many people hungry, but many others in our society are suffering from poor diets driven by economic pressures. Recent studies confirm that junk food in children's diets can also result in attention deficits and hyperactivity.

The array of reasons why so many people suffer from hunger are vast. Often people think that widespread hunger is inevitable on a planet with nearly 7 billion people. But, as Nobel Prize winning economist, Amartya Sen, has shown, the famines of the 20th Century were due not to a lack of food but rather a lack of ability for people to get food. Poor people can't afford to purchase the food and, as a result, they go hungry. Today, this is the primary reason for malnourishment. However, this reason, as simple as it is, can serve as a legitimate excuse for some. It is not. Right now, there is more food being produced worldwide than ever before—17 percent more calories per person than in the 1970s (World Hunger Education Services, WHES). Therefore, there is absolutely no reason for people to be hungry.

According to FAO, the recent increase in malnourished people worldwide (up over 150 million people in past three years) is due to three main factors: (1) the recent economic crisis; (2) significant

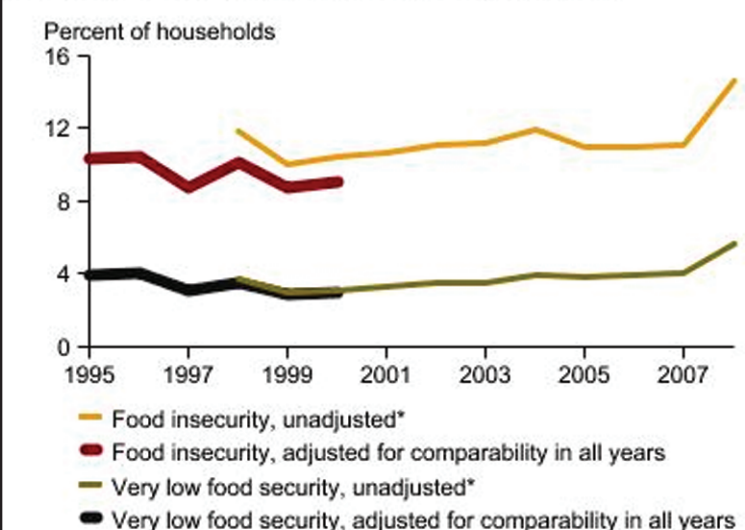
price increases in food; and, (3) "neglect of agriculture . . . by governments and international agencies" (WHES). While the blame for the economic crisis can be spread in many directions, when food prices get too high people on the margins suffer greatly. Since food is commodified in nearly every aspect now, it is no wonder that profiteers, here and elsewhere, drive food commodity (including, rice, wheat and corn) prices up even during a "time of plenty." Now, the whims of the market make it so millions more people go hungry. Additionally, worldwide efforts to expand the size of farms (driven by the monetary support of The World Bank and trade policies promoted by the World Trade Organization) actually reduces food availability for more and more poor people, who have lost their ability to grow for themselves. Sadly, unless something significant is done to change the system currently operating, more suffering is inevitable. It is despicable that we've reached this point, even having lived through such great malnourishment and starvation much of the 20th Century.

However, there are lots of people interested in this issue. In fact, last month, an international World Summit on Food Security was held in Rome, Italy. And while sixty countries sent their head of state, an indication of the supreme importance this issue holds for them, among major world leaders only Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi was in attendance. Perhaps due to the real, or perceived, lack of power, no firm commitments or deadlines were reached. Despite a recognition of the severity of the problem, government leaders don't seem able to solve the problem. Is it because they are beholden to big Agro (i.e., multinational corporations that are gaining larger and larger control of seeds, chemicals, and farming techniques) or something else? At the Summit, Jacques Diouf pointed out that the \$44 billion needed to eliminate world hunger pales in comparison to over \$350 billion given as subsidies to large agricultural producer and the more than \$1,300 billion spent on military (in 2007). Apparently, we're either being duped or we have our priorities misplaced. Whatever the reason, it is inexcusable. Sadly enough, things are likely to get worse not better. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who spoke at the Summit, pointed out that impending climate change, and in particular melting Himalayan glaciers, will likely make crop harvests in the most densely populated parts of the world (i.e., China and India) decline sharply. Given the circumstances, we must find ways to solve these problems in new and innovative ways. We have several suggestions that will be flushed out in essays to follow in coming weeks.

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*Data as collected (unadjusted) in 1995-97 are not directly comparable with data collected in 1998 and later years.

Source: Calculated by ERS based on Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data.