



## Fact Sheet 19

## What is Hunger?

### What is hunger?

The sensation of hunger, a lack of food in your stomach, is universal. But there are different manifestations of hunger which are each measured in different ways:

- a. **Under-nourishment** is used to describe the status of people whose food intake does not include enough calories (energy) to meet minimum physiological needs for an active life. At present, there are around 854 million undernourished people worldwide: 820 million undernourished people in developing countries, 25 million in countries in transition and nine million in industrialised countries.
- b. **Malnutrition** means 'badly nourished', but is more than a measure of what we eat or fail to eat. Malnutrition is characterised by inadequate intake of protein, energy and micronutrients and by frequent infections and diseases. Starved of the right nutrition, people will die from common infections like measles or diarrhoea.

Malnutrition is measured not by how much food is eaten but by physical measurements of the body - weight or height - and age.

### What are the effects of malnutrition?

Malnutrition covers a range of problems, such as being dangerously thin, being too short for one's age, being deficient in vitamins and minerals (such as lacking iron which makes you anaemic), or even being too fat (obese). It is measured using the following indicators:

**Wasting** is an indicator of acute malnutrition that reflects a recent and severe process that has led to substantial weight loss. This is usually the result of starvation and/or disease.

**Stunting** is an indicator of chronic malnutrition that reflects the long-term nutritional situation of a population. It is calculated by comparing the height-for-age of a child with a reference population of well nourished and healthy children.

**Underweight** is measured by comparing the weight-for-age of a child with a reference population of well-nourished and healthy children. An estimated 126.5 million children in developing countries are underweight.

### Who are the hungry?

Ask about the hungry and most people will talk about the victims of Ethiopia's famine in 1984-85, homeless families marooned by Bangladeshi floods or the people displaced and living in camps in Darfur. While it is true that in 2005, disasters affected over 146 million people, with floods, tsunamis and earthquakes among the biggest killers, emergencies account for less than eight percent of hunger's victims.

Few people realise that there are over 850 million hungry people in the world who don't make the headlines -- more than the combined populations of the United States, Japan and the European Union. They are of all ages, from babies whose mothers cannot produce enough milk to the elderly with no relatives to care for them. They are the unemployed inhabitants of urban slums, the landless farmers tilling other people's fields, the orphans of AIDS and the sick, who need special or increased food intake to survive.

Above all, children, women and rural communities are on the frontlines of hunger.

### **Where are the hungry?**

The percentage of hungry people is highest in east, central and southern Africa. Around three-quarters of undernourished people live in low-income rural areas of developing countries, principally in higher-risk farming areas. However, the share of the hungry in urban areas is rising.

Of the total number of over 820 million chronically hungry people:

- 212 million are in India
- 206.2 million are in Sub-Saharan Africa
- 524 million are in Asia and the Pacific
- 52.4 million are in Latin America and the Caribbean
- 37.6 million are in the Near East and North Africa

### **Are the numbers going down?**

Since the second half of the 1990s, the number of chronically hungry in developing countries has been increasing at a rate of almost four million per year. Today, one in nearly seven people do not get enough food to be healthy and lead an active life, making hunger and malnutrition the number one risk to health worldwide -- greater than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined.

Source: World Food Program website <http://www.wfp.org/english/>