

Cutting World Hunger in Half

Pedro A. Sanchez and M. S. Swaminathan

The Millennium Project was commissioned by the United Nations Secretary-General to recommend the best strategies for meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (1). In October 2002, the Hunger Task Force was established to determine how to meet the hunger MDG—to reduce the proportion of hungry people in half from 1990 to 2015. Task Force members came from diverse backgrounds in science, policy, the private sector, civil society, U.N. agencies, and government, with broad representation from developed and developing countries (2). After analysis, stakeholder consultations, and observation, the Task Force has just produced its report (2), which is summarized here.

Enhanced online at
www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/307/5708/357

Diagnosis

There are 854 million people in the world (about 14% of our population) who are chronically or acutely malnourished. Most are in Asia, but sub-Saharan Africa is the only region where hunger prevalence is over 30%, and the absolute numbers of malnourished people are increasing (3). More than 90% are chronically malnourished (4), with a constant or recurrent lack of access to sufficient quality and quantity of food, good health care, and adequate maternal caring practices. Acute hunger (the wasting and starvation resulting from famines, war, and natural disaster) represents 10% of the hungry yet receives most of the media coverage and attention. In addition, hidden hunger from micronutrient deficiencies affects more than 2 billion people worldwide. Chronic and hidden hunger deserve much more global attention and support.

Roughly 50% of the hungry are in smallholder farming households; 20% are the landless rural; 10% are pastoralists, fishers, and forest dwellers; and 20% are the urban hungry. The Task Force has identified hunger hot spots, defined as the sub-

national units where the prevalence of underweight children (4) less than 5 years of age is at least 20%. The 313 hunger hot spots identified (see the figure on page 358) indicate priority regions, as they cover 79% of the hungry.

The importance of different causes of hunger varies among regions. Low agricultural productivity is likely to be the primary reason in tropical Africa and remote parts of Asia and Latin America, whereas poverty and unemployment are the main causes in most of South and East Asia, Latin America, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

Economically, hunger results in annual losses of 6 to 10% in foregone Gross Domestic Product (GDP) due to losses in labor productivity. Economic growth alone is insufficient for eliminating hunger, because so many hungry people live in deep poverty traps, beyond the reach of markets (5). People affected by HIV/AIDS become unable to grow food or work for a living. Malnourishment weakens their immunity and strength, making them succumb more quickly to disease (6). Similarly, nearly 57% of malaria deaths are attributable to malnutrition (7). The challenge of halving hunger is, therefore, closely linked with that of achieving other MDGs.

Recommendations

The Task Force calls for simultaneous action at global (recommendation 1), national (recommendation 2), and local levels (recommendations 3 to 7) (see the figure on page 359).

1. *Move from political commitment to action.* A commitment to halving world hunger was made by all member countries of the United Nations at the World Food Summits of 1996 and 2001, the Millennium Summit of 2000, the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, and the 2002 Monterrey Summit on Development Finance. The message for political leaders is that halving hunger is within our means; what has been lacking is action to implement and scale up known solutions.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations reinforced this message when he called for a “uniquely African green revolution for the 21st century” (8).

2. *Reform policy and create an enabling environment for hunger reduction.*

Government policies in poor countries can make or break efforts to end hunger. Good governance, including the rule of law, low levels of corruption, and respect for human rights, is essential for achieving food security. Policies conducive to ending hunger and poverty need to be put in place at all levels, from the local to the national.

The Task Force proposes that poor countries integrate hunger reduction action plans into their Poverty Reduction Strategies or equivalent national planning process. Poor countries need to adopt a multisectoral approach to hunger reduction. African governments should invest at least 10% of their national budgets specifically in agriculture and nutrition, in addition to making investments in rural energy, infrastructure, health, education, and other sectors. Building capacity at all levels should be the central goal of national government and donor-funded activities. Linking nutritional and agricultural interventions, which are so often implemented separately, would be a powerful means of creating more effective hunger reduction programs.

Clearly assigned and enforceable rights for women to own, inherit, and trade land must be guaranteed. Women and girls need better access to services such as credit, health care, and education, as well as to technologies that will ease the workload of rural women, such as rooftop water harvesting and growing trees for firewood close to home.

Agricultural research has been a major driver of hunger reduction. The Task Force recommends doubling investments in national research to at least 2% of agricultural GDP by 2010. It also recommends that donors increase funding to the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research to US\$1 billion by 2010.

3. *Increase agricultural productivity of food-insecure farmers.* Small-scale farming families represent about half the hungry worldwide and probably three-quarters of the hungry in Africa. Raising the productivity of their crops, livestock, fish, and trees is a major priority.

Restoring soil health is often the first entry point for increasing agricultural productivity, because soil nutrient depletion is extreme in most areas where farmers have small holdings, as in Africa (9). Applying appropriate combinations of mineral and organic fertilizers, using leguminous green manures and agroforestry fertilizer trees, returning crop residues to the soil, and using improved methods of soil conservation can

P. A. Sanchez is at the Earth Institute at Columbia University, New York, NY 10964, USA. E-mail: sanchez@iri.columbia.edu; M. S. Swaminathan chairs the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Taramani, Chennai 600 113, India. E-mail: msswami@mssrf.res.in. The authors cochair the U.N. Millennium Project Task Force on Hunger.