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United Nations report finds global hunger on the rise for third year in row



A report published this week by the United Nations (UN) shows that over 820 million people across the world suffered from hunger in 2018. The annual report cast doubt on the UN's purported goal of ending world hunger by 2030, describing it as "an immense challenge." Last year marked the third year in a row that hunger levels have risen with roughly one in every nine people globally going hungry.

The rise in hunger and food insecurity is inextricably linked to the rise of social inequality, the outbreak of new wars and conflicts and the disastrous effects of climate change. Contrary to the neo-Malthusian arguments that hunger, like environmental degradation,

stems from “overpopulation,” any serious analysis of the report’s findings ultimately points to the crisis of capitalism and the irrational distribution of the world’s resources.

The authors themselves note dangerous economic trends, such as nationalist trade policies, which have contributed to world hunger and continue to threaten any ability to reverse such processes. “This dark outlook,” the report states, “reflects increasing risks related to rising trade tensions, weakening investments, increasing government and corporate debt, and rising borrowing costs.”

Such tragic figures point to a society and global economic system in retrograde. The growth of world hunger over the past three years, itself a departure from roughly a decade of so-called “progress” involving a pitifully marginal increase in world living standards, has arisen out of concrete historical conditions.

Such a phenomenon is only possible in a world where 26 billionaires control as much wealth as the poorest half of humanity. Increasingly bloody neocolonial proxy wars—such as the war in Yemen, named one of the greatest humanitarian disasters in human history—deprive millions of basic needs such as food, water and medical supplies. Climate change, a product of the capitalist mismanagement of the world’s resources, has led to increasingly extreme weather conditions such as droughts, floods and storms, all of which have produced famine conditions for millions more.

The report, titled “The State of Food Insecurity and Nutrition in the World: Safeguarding Against Economic Slowdowns and Downturns,” was organized by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. UN researchers produced the paper in tandem with the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme and the World Health Organization.

A breakdown of statistics by region shows that hunger has risen almost 20 percent in Africa’s subregions. In Eastern Africa, close to one-third of the population (30.8 per cent) is undernourished. Although hunger levels in Latin America and the Caribbean still remain below seven percent, they are slowly increasing. In Asia, 11 percent of the population is undernourished.

The UN found that hunger is increasing primarily in countries where economic growth is lagging, particularly countries that rely heavily on the international trade of primary commodities—i.e., food, raw materials, fuels and base metals. It also found that income inequality is on the rise in many of these countries, a process which will serve to

exacerbate the problem. “Income inequality increases the likelihood of severe food insecurity,” the report states.

In other words, the problem of hunger is most severe in countries most vulnerable to the predations of world imperialism. The report identifies “middle earning” countries as among the most affected by increases in hunger. These are nations with vast amounts of natural resources and platforms of cheap labor that are routinely exploited by the banks and major corporations of the centers of world imperialism—above all, of the United States and European powers.

For the first time since the creation of the yearly report, researchers chose to take a broader look at food insecurity. The report introduced a second indicator, distinct from hunger, which found that 17.2 percent of the world’s population—1.3 billion people—lack regular access to “nutritious and sufficient food.”

“Even if they were not necessarily suffering from hunger,” the report states, “they are at greater risk of various forms of malnutrition and poor health.” When these figures are combined with those suffering from hunger, the report estimates that 2 billion people are affected by moderate to severe food insecurity.

The report places special attention on the conditions of children, a measuring stick of the relative health of society as a whole. It found that since 2012, no progress has been made in reducing low birthweight. It also found that while the number of children under the age of five affected by stunted growth has decreased over the past six years, the pace of progress is far too slow to meet 2030 targets. In southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, one in three children are stunted. Finally, overweight and obesity—themselves indicators of malnutrition—continue to increase globally, particularly among school-age children and adults. It points out that these problems will inevitably disrupt other developmental patterns across a wide array of indices.

Unsurprisingly, the report does not provide any realistic solutions to the crisis. Despite the far-reaching implications of the report’s findings, its authors remain at an impasse. “Our actions to tackle these troubling trends will have to be bolder,” the report declares. “We must foster pro-poor and inclusive structural transformation focusing on people and placing communities at the centre to reduce economic vulnerabilities and set ourselves on track to ending hunger, food insecurity and all forms of malnutrition.”

Unable to draw deeper conclusions about the failure of world capitalism, the report at best can only offer unrealistic proposals for reform. Above all, the authors of the report advise

against any further cuts to social programs or trade policies that would threaten economic downturn. As the ruling classes of the world shift further and further to the right, however, they increasingly will base themselves upon these very policies in an attempt to offset the growing internal economic contradictions of their various nation-states.

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