

# Hunger and Poverty: Definitions and Distinctions

Hunger and poverty are powerful but familiar terms. Everyone knows what they mean, yet, they evoke different images for everyone. Even major international organizations mandated to alleviate hunger and poverty use a variety of interpretations.

The United Nations, perhaps the most prominent international institution dealing with hunger and poverty, divides poverty into two general classifications: income poverty and human poverty.<sup>1</sup> Although there are multiple ways to define poverty, most fall into one of these two broad categories.

The Hunger Project has always taken a holistic approach to hunger. Although hunger can and is often described in terms of its medical implications, hunger can also be viewed as representative of all the tragic and horrific circumstances that cause it. Poverty causes hunger. Resignation causes hunger. Gender discrimination causes hunger. The Hunger Project board member Mohini Giri said, “To me, hunger is rape, molestation, dowry, illiteracy, female feticide, female infanticide, and above all, it is patriarchy. That is what hunger is all about to me.” The Hunger Project treats hunger as a symptom of the problem of poverty, dependence, and inequality. Embedded in all of our work is the pursuit to end not only persistent hunger for nutrition, but also the hunger for free expression, for self-reliance, for dignity, and for a fulfilled life.

## **Income Poverty**

Income poverty is an understanding of poverty that is solely based on levels of monetary income. It is used by both the World Bank and the UN. According to the World Bank, people living on less than US\$1 per day are living in extreme poverty, and people who earn less than US\$2 a day are in moderate poverty.<sup>2</sup>

Worldwide, approximately one billion people live on less than US\$1 a day.<sup>3</sup> About 2.6 billion live on less than US\$2 a day. This amounts to 40% of the world’s population.<sup>4</sup> South Asia is the region with the greatest concentration of extreme poverty. In India, the world’s second most populous nation, 34% live on less than US\$1 a day and 80% live on less than US\$2 a day.<sup>5</sup> In Sub-Saharan Africa, 41% of the population lives on less than US\$1 a day.<sup>6</sup>

Income poverty is also used to determine a poverty threshold or poverty line. This is the boundary between poverty and non-poverty as determined by governments. It is based on the cost of subsistence needs in a given country<sup>7</sup> so, while US\$1 a day is the international poverty line, for countries where the cost of living is higher, the poverty line is higher. In the United States, for example, the poverty line is at about US\$28 a day.<sup>8</sup>

## **Human Poverty**

Whereas income poverty is based on only one indicator, human poverty encompasses the multiplicity of dimensions associated with poverty. It includes deprivation on a material level, e.g. lack of proper diet, clothing, shelter, and work. It also includes social deprivation, such as denial of employment, participation in social institutions, and education.<sup>9</sup> The UN utilizes the human poverty framework as well as income poverty. The UN’s Economic and Social Council has described human poverty as:

*“... a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and clothe a*

*family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living on marginal or fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation”<sup>10</sup>*

## **Hunger**

From the most comprehensive perspective, hunger describes the feeling of discomfort that is the body's signal that it is in need of more food. All people experience this feeling at times but, for most people, particularly in the developed world, this phenomenon is a fleeting event that is alleviated once the next meal is taken, causing no deep or permanent damage.<sup>11</sup> When hunger or lack of food persists, however, the consequences can be devastating.

## **Undernourishment**

According to the FAO, undernourishment is the measure of food deprivation. An individual is considered undernourished if he or she doesn't receive enough dietary energy to maintain a healthy and active life.<sup>12</sup>

854 million people are undernourished worldwide; 820 million in developing countries.<sup>13</sup> In Sub-Saharan Africa, 32% of the population is undernourished. Ethiopia has a population in which 46% of people are undernourished. Although sub-Saharan Africa accounts for only 13% of the population in the developing world, it accounts for 25% of its undernourished.

The next highest regional concentration of undernourishment is South Asia, where 22% of the population is undernourished. In Bangladesh, 30% are undernourished and India has a rate of 20%. The absolute number of undernourished people is highest in India: India has 212 million undernourished people, the largest in the world.

In Latin America, 10% of the population is undernourished. In Peru, the rate is 12% and in Bolivia, the rate is 23%.<sup>14</sup>

## **Malnutrition**

Malnutrition is caused by more than just a lack of dietary energy. It can occur if the quality or variety of food is insufficient even if there is plenty in terms of quantity. Infections, disease, and unsafe water and sanitation can also cause malnutrition.<sup>15</sup>

There are several ways in which malnutrition is measured. Wasting and underweight are indicators based on comparisons to healthy weight averages for specific ages.<sup>16</sup> Stunting is an indicator of chronic malnutrition and is based upon height-for-age.<sup>17</sup> Birthweight is strongly related to the birth mother's health and impacts a baby's long and short term chances for survival, its growth, and its long-term health and psychosocial development.<sup>18</sup>

Malnutrition is a process with consequences that may extend not only into later life, but also into future generations. A malnourished mother is more likely to give birth to an underweight or unhealthy child. Malnourishment often begins in utero and can persist over a lifetime. In children, malnutrition is synonymous with growth failure. Malnourished children are shorter and

lighter than they should be. A cycle of malnutrition can consume and endanger generations of healthy lives.<sup>19</sup>

The degree of malnutrition in the developing world is severe. In the least developed countries, 35% of children of ages 0-5 years are either moderately or severely underweight. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 38% of children in this age group are moderately or severely stunted. In South Asia, this rate is 47%. The global rate for moderate or severe wasting is 11%, in comparison to 18% in South Asia. Additionally, 29% of infants are born underweight in South Asia.<sup>20</sup>

## **The relationship between hunger and poverty**

Not every poor person is hungry, but almost all hungry people are poor. Millions live with hunger and malnourishment because they simply cannot afford to buy enough food, cannot afford nutritious foods, or cannot afford the farming supplies they need to grow enough good food of their own.<sup>21</sup> Hunger can be viewed as a dimension of extreme poverty. It is often called the most severe and critical manifestation of poverty.

The United Nation's Millennium Development Goals conflate hunger and poverty in its first goal to "eradicate extreme poverty and hunger." The indicators used for this goal measure income poverty, undernourishment, and malnutrition, but also the employment-to-population ratio and other employment indicators, the growth rate of the economy, and the poverty gap ratio<sup>22</sup> (measure of the depth of poverty below the poverty line).

Historical trends suggest that poverty declines more quickly than undernourishment.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that poverty reduction usually first benefits those who are not so poor as to be hungry.

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