

# Food First BACKGROUNDER

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*Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Director-General José Graziano da Silva. Photo by ©FAO/Roberto Cenciarelli*

## The True Extent of Hunger: What the FAO Isn't Telling You

Last year, the final report of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) from the United Nations announced a milestone in the fight to end global hunger, declaring:

“Projections indicate a drop of almost half in the proportion of undernourished people in the developing regions, from 23.3% in 1990–1992 to 12.9% in 2014–2016. This is very close to the MDG hunger target.”

Should we celebrate the “most successful anti-poverty movement in history”? Not yet.

By other measures hunger and undernourishment are increasing. Despite record world harvests and enough food to feed everyone 3000 calories a day, independent analyses indicate that half the world is going hungry. Measuring hunger correctly is important. It tells us whether the combination of thirty years of neoliberal economic policies and decades of multilateral development projects have made things better—or have actually made them worse. How can the calculations be so different?

## Shifting the goalposts

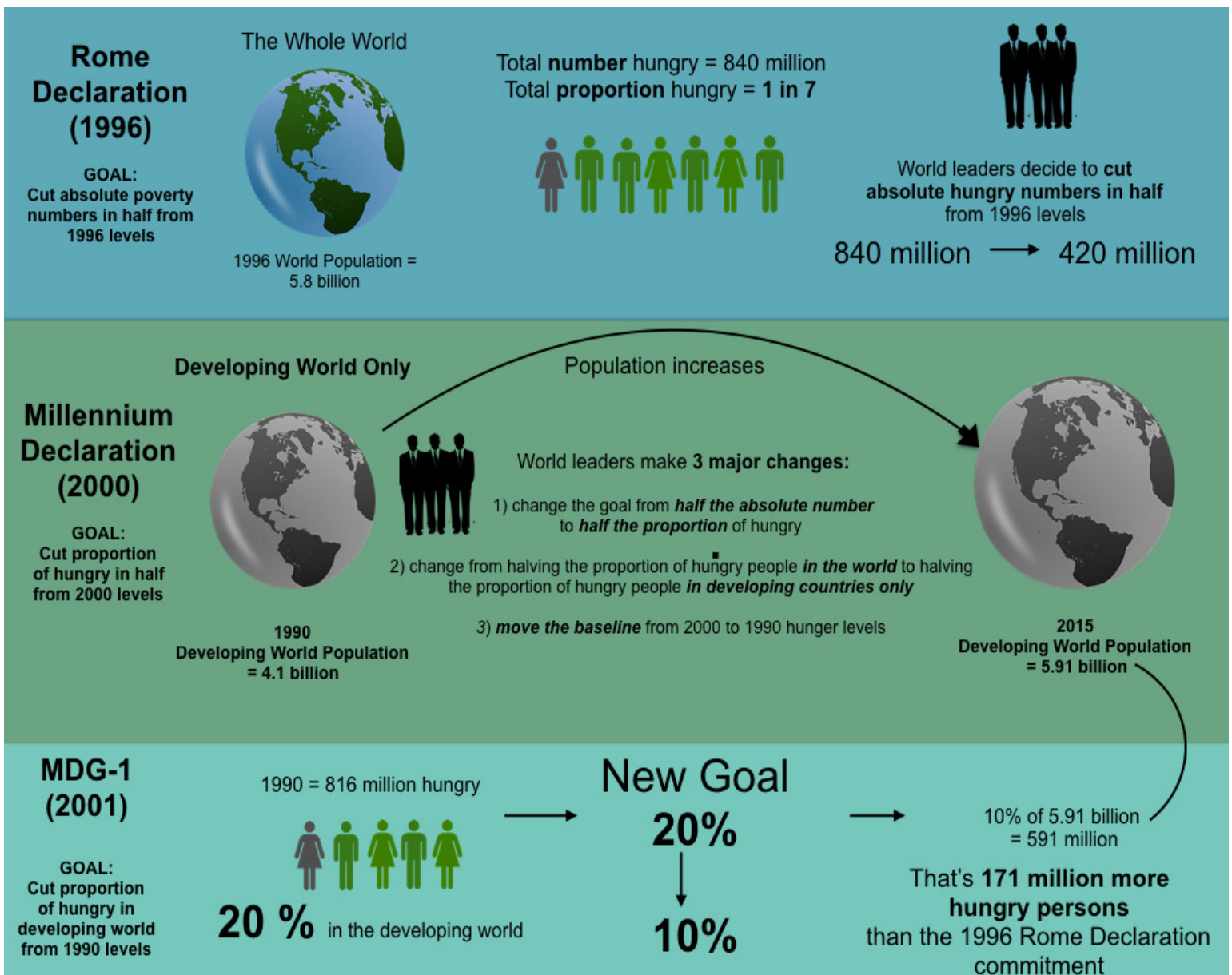
In 1996 with 840 million people going hungry worldwide, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations called leaders from 185 countries to the World Food Summit in Rome. Many delegates wanted a global commitment to end hunger completely. After all, the world had never been so affluent. Over two decades had passed since the first World Food Conference in which US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's famously promised to end hunger within 10 years. Instead, the Declaration of Rome promised

to reduce the total number of hungry people only by half—to 420 million by 2015.

Four years later at the 2000 Millennium Summit held at UN headquarters in New York City, the Millennium Declaration diluted the Rome Declaration's commitment even further from cutting the total numbers of hungry people, to reducing the proportion of hungry people by half by 2015. Because of global population increase, this adjustment meant ending hunger for only 296 million people—not 420 million.

The MDGs weakened the target even more by declaring that halving the proportion of hungry people would only apply to developing countries—where population growth is highest. This meant even more people would be allowed to go hungry.

The next "easing" of official commitment was to backdate the base year from 2000 when the goals were agreed upon, to 1990. Why? First of all, it allowed rich western countries to take advantage of China's extraordinary accomplishments of the 1990's in which millions of



people were pulled from poverty and hunger—even though China was not part of the Millennium Declaration. It also extended the period of population growth, (thus increasing the proportion of people saved from hunger) and allowed the MDGs to claim gains in hunger reduction before the MDGs actually began.

In fact, the new MDG for hunger increased the “acceptable” number of hungry people in the world from 420 million to 591 million and slowed the rate of hunger reduction from 3.58% per year to 1.25% per year – down to almost one-third of the original rate.

But that’s not all. The UN then decided to change the original numbers used in the 1990 baseline. Twice.

In 1992 the FAO had reported that in 1990, 786 million people had gone hungry in the developing world. But ten years later—a year after the MDGs were signed—they inflated the number to 816 million. Why? Because this allowed the FAO to report a decrease of 30 million more hungry people than would otherwise have been the case.

Then, in 2004 the FAO reported that hunger had increased to 815 million people. Even with the revised calculations, this meant that in four years the developed countries had only reduced hunger by 1 million people—hunger had actually increased from the original 1990 calculation of 786 million. So, the FAO revised the original 1990 figure again, increasing it to 824 million, so that hunger appeared to have decreased after all.

## **Ignoring the Global Food Price Crisis**

In 2008 the global food price crisis hit, pushing the price of food beyond historic levels and driving over 150 million people into the ranks of the hungry. The FAO reported a record 1 billion hungry people—at a time of record harvests and record corporate profits. Reaching the MDG targets was going to be impossible. The developed world was losing the battle of hunger in the developing world.

As the MDGs 2015 expiration date approached, the FAO revised the numbers again. In 2012 they announced hunger in the developing world was down from its 1 billion record high in 2008, to 852 million people. This was still higher than in 1990 (824 million), meaning the world was getting farther away from the MDG hunger target. So, the FAO adjusted the 1990 numbers up again from 824 million to 980 million. This made it appear that proportional hunger was decreasing: from 23% in 1990 to 15% in 2012. The United Nations 2013 report on the MDGs proclaimed, “Progress in reducing hunger has been more pronounced than previously believed, and the target of halving the percentage of people suffering from hunger by 2015 is within reach.”

Radically altering the methodology of a 25-year longitudinal study just three years before its conclusion is bad practice by any scientific standard, but the FAO was under intense pressure from the Committee of World Food Security to change its numbers:

The jump in the number of undernourished, posited to have occurred in 2009, led commentators to voice concerns about the reliability of the FAO method to estimate the

number of hungry. These concerns culminated in the request to FAO by the Committee of World Food Security... to organize a Technical Round Table to discuss the FAO measures of undernourishment. The outcomes of the Round Table... gave impetus to the set of revisions and innovations implemented since.

How did they do it? First, the FAO abandoned its forecasting model so that it would not reflect the impact of the economic crisis, thus erasing the spike in hunger after 2008. Second, the new methodology used revised estimates of country food supplies and food waste, new population estimates, new assumptions about food inequality and access to calories and revised data on population heights. The changes worked: the numbers released in 2012 indicated that hunger was constant during the period of the food price crisis. Astonishingly, the FAO states that “[Its] methodology does not... fully reflect the effects on hunger of the 2007–08 price spikes... let alone the recent price increases.”

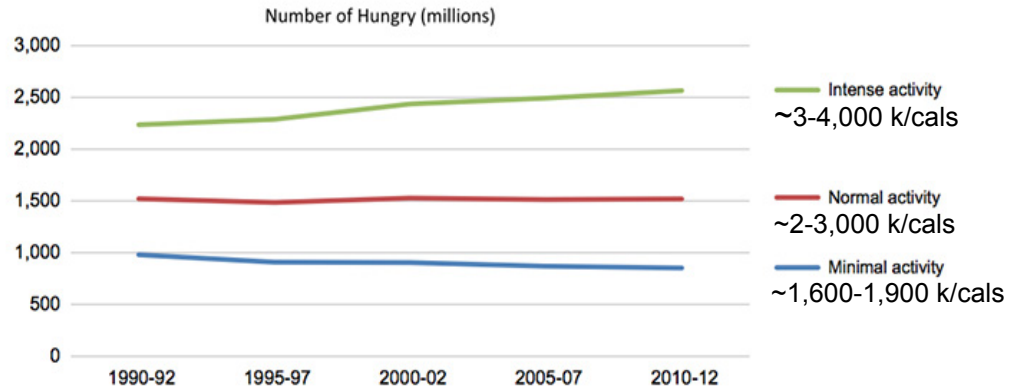
But how can the FAO ignore a food price crisis affecting over 150 million people?

## **What is being measured?**

The FAO counts people as hungry only when caloric intake becomes inadequate to cover even minimum needs for a sedentary lifestyle for over a year. But most hungry people are peasant farmers engaged in demanding physical labor and need up to 3,000-4,000 calories a day—much more than the FAO’s “sedentary” minimum caloric threshold. Most of these farmers are women, who are often nursing children and need at least another 500 calories a day.



The FAO's caloric threshold varies by country, from 1,651 calories/day for Timor Leste to 1,900 calories/day for the Netherlands. The threshold is lower for people in Timor Leste because they are shorter than people in the Netherlands. But short stature in a population is often a sign of undernourishment, indicating that people require more, not less calories.



If we measure hunger at the more accurate (and still conservative) level of calories required for normal activity, we see that 1.5 billion people are hungry, according to an annex in the FAO's own 2012 report, which is twice as many as the UN would have us believe. If we measure hunger at the level of calories required for intense activity, the number of hungry is 2.5 billion.

Further, measuring hunger by counting calories is deceptive. Though the FAO admits there are 2.1 billion people suffering serious vitamin and nutrient deficiencies, they are not counted as hungry. What the FAO counts is caloric intake, not actual nutrition. And people who are hungry for months at a time are not counted as hungry, since the definition of hunger only captures hunger that lasts for over a year. Incredibly, the FAO appears to believe that 11 months of hunger is not detrimental to health.

## China saves the MDGs

In reality 73% of the gains that the UN claims against hunger come from China, most of which occurred during the 1990s, before the MDGs even began. Progress against hunger in China during that period was largely the result

of land reform, which guaranteed small farmers secure access to land. But land reform is not a strategy promoted by the MDGs; in fact the policy direction advocated by the UN tends to be towards consolidation of land in corporate hands (such as through the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, which the UN promotes).

If we subtract China's gains – and the gains of a few other high-achieving countries, including Vietnam, Brazil and Peru – half of all developing countries have seen an increase in the number of hungry people since 1990, even according to the FAO's most conservative definition. This is also true of the 45 Least Developed Countries as a group, which has experienced a net increase of 59 million hungry people. Sub-Saharan African countries have experienced a net increase of 64 million.

## 2.5 billion go hungry despite the "good news narrative"

Through the MDGs, the UN has misrepresented the true extent of hunger. In reality between 1.5 and 2.5 billion people do not have access to adequate food—two times more than the UN would have us believe.

And the numbers are rising, not falling.

The objective of the MDG "good-news narrative" is to justify business as usual in terms of 30 years of global economic policy: free trade agreements, massive land grabs, the monopolization of land, water and genetic resources by corporate agrifoods giants and the financial speculation with food prices. Above all, it seeks to justify the dramatic increases in global inequality, inviting us to believe that even though fewer than 80 people now own more wealth than the poorest 3.5 billion, the food system is still ending hunger and poverty.

After the expiration of the Millennium Development Goals, the UN introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). "Ending hunger by 2030" is the second of 17 ambitious goals proposed by the UN (to be signed in September 2016).

If the new SDGs are to mean anything—and if world leaders are to be held to their commitments to end world hunger—we also have to end the manipulation of hunger statistics.

*This article is based on "Hickel, J. (2016). The true extent of global poverty and hunger: Questioning the good news narrative of the Millennium Development Goals. Third World Quarterly." See the original article for all references.*

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