

Summary

All indicators developed by USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) point to slow improvement in food security over the next decade for the 70 low-income developing countries included in this report. Average per capita food consumption for these countries stagnated in 2002 and the number of people not meeting nutritional requirements is estimated to be higher than in 2001.

About 1 billion people are estimated to face a precarious food security situation in 2002, higher than the 896 million estimated in 2001. However, the number of food insecure people is projected to decline to about 708 million by 2012. The cause of chronic food insecurity is not only poverty but also short-term shocks—natural as well as economic—that intensify the problem. Political instability further worsens a country's level of food insecurity and sometimes leads to famine.

An examination of the instability of production of staple crops in low-income countries shows the effect of short-term shocks. Fifty-three of the 70 countries suffered shortfalls from trend exceeding 20 percent at least once during the last 20 years. Seventeen of these countries experienced such a shock more than five times during the same period.

The food security situations of the 70 countries are evaluated by estimating and projecting the gaps between food consumption (domestic production plus commercial imports minus nonfood use) and two different consumption targets through the next decade: (1) the status quo target, which maintains per capita consumption at the 1999-2001 level, and (2) the nutrition target, which meets recommended nutritional requirements. This nutrition target is also applied to five income groups within a country.

The food needed (in grain equivalent) to maintain per capita food consumption at the 1999-2001 level is estimated at close to 7 million tons in 2002. The food gap to meet average nutritional requirements is 17.7 million tons. The distribution gap—the amount of food needed to raise consumption in each income group to meet nutritional requirements—is about 31 million tons.

Regionally, the food security situation in Sub-Saharan Africa (37 countries) is not expected to improve much during the next decade without a significant effort to improve economic policies and establish political stability. Frequent short-term instability in domestic agricultural production provides an added threat to food insecurity. The lack of effective food safety net programs amplifies the problem, thereby increasing the likelihood of famine. Our 2002 estimates show a much higher number of hungry people in Asia than in Sub-Saharan Africa, but the situation is expected to reverse by 2012. In fact, under our baseline scenario (no significant policy change), the number of hungry people in Asia will decline by more than half by 2012, surpassing the target set by the World Food Summit, while there will be a 27-percent increase in Sub-Saharan Africa.