

Summary

Based on all the indicators developed by USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS), the aggregate food security situation for the 67 low-income countries monitored in this report deteriorated in 2001 relative to estimates in 2000. The main reason is the impact of food production shortfalls in many countries coinciding with the global economic slowdown that intensified foreign exchange constraints in these countries and limited their ability to import food. Short-term shocks that threaten food security are not uncommon. In fact, ERS' estimates of the number of hungry people in the 67 countries show annually a mix of success and failure at the country level since the mid-1990s.

This year's deterioration, coupled with slow progress in improving food security in the recent past, casts growing doubt on achieving the goal set at the World Food Summit in 1996 to halve the number of hungry people by 2015. The ERS projections for the next decade show a 1.6-percent annual decline in the number of hungry people. This suggests that the situation will improve, but will fall short of the 3.5-percent annual decline needed to achieve the goal of the World Food Summit.

The food security situations of the 67 developing countries included in this report are evaluated by estimating and projecting the gaps between food consumption (domestic production plus commercial imports minus non-food use) and two different consumption targets through the next decade. The two consumption targets are: 1) maintaining per capita consumption at the 1998-2000 level (also referred to as the status quo target) and, 2) meeting recommended nutritional requirements (the nutrition target). This nutrition target is also applied to five income groups within a country.

Despite this year's setback with respect to food security, the situation is projected to improve slightly at the aggregate level during the next decade. The food gap to meet nutritional requirements is projected at 16 million tons in 2011, a decline of 2 million tons from 2001. The distribution gap—the amount of food needed to raise consumption in each income group to meet nutritional requirements—is projected at about 24 million tons in 2011, or 6 million tons less than 2001. The number of hungry people (consuming less than 2,100 calories per day on average) is projected to decline to 765 million by 2011, or 1.6 percent per year.

The slow rate of improvement in food security means that there will be many countries vulnerable to food insecurity over the long term. In 2001, 29 of the 67 countries consumed less than the nutritional requirement; this number is projected to decline only slightly to 23 by 2011. Food access remains a common problem among the lower income populations in almost all countries.

Sub-Saharan Africa continues to be the most vulnerable region, accounting for 23 percent of the population in the 67 countries, but 38 percent of the number of hungry people in 2001. The number of hungry people in the region is estimated at 337 million in 2001, or about 57 percent of the total population. This number has increased by about 19 percent since the mid-1990 level, and this upward trend is expected to continue.

Food aid has been a major tool used by the international community to improve food access and to reduce suffering from emergency conditions in low-income countries. Cereal food aid shipments for 2000 were about 8.5 million tons. The United States continued to be the main source of aid, providing 55 percent of the total.

Depending upon the future availability of food aid, parts of the projected food gaps can be eliminated. If food aid levels in 2001 were the same as in 2000, food aid would fill 80 percent of the calculated gap to maintain per capita consumption (status quo) and nearly half of the nutritional gap. In terms of the number of hungry people, if countries receive the same level of food aid in 2001 as in 2000 (that is, no change in the country or quantity allocations), the estimated number of hungry people would be 691 million, rather than 744 million.