

FOOD FOR THE WORLD

Enough for everyone?

Having enough food to eat is the most basic of human needs. Cereals like wheat, rice and maize, are the staple food in most people's diets and a good guide to world food production. The world produces around 300 kilograms of grain per person per year – enough to feed everyone if the food was shared equally and used efficiently.

The tragedy is that over 800 million, or one in seven people, go to bed hungry every night. It is estimated that 12 million people die of hunger every year (FAO 2002).

Droughts in wealthy countries like Australia are serious, but do not lead to famine or loss of life. However, in poor countries, a drought can result in long term famine, hunger and death.

Famine or hunger?

Famine or severe food shortages in a region can result from wars, droughts, floods and pest attacks. Hunger, on the other hand, occurs when people don't get enough nutrients to sustain a healthy, active life – normally because of poverty. Food production is not the main problem, but access to food and food distribution – especially for the poor.

Chronic hunger stunts growth, increases the likelihood of disease, and leaves people feeling weak and lethargic. This can stop children attending school and reduces learning when they do attend. It reduces the ability of adults to work and increases the health risks for babies and pregnant mothers. In countries where hunger is most common, one in seven children will die before their fifth birthday. This all contributes to a cycle of hunger and poverty.

How do non-government organisations (NGOs) help?

I. Encourage sustainable agriculture



A sustainable agriculture project in Mozambique.

This means enabling farmers to produce good crops year after year without going into debt or exhausting their land.

For example, growing a variety of crops in succession, or interplanted in the same field, helps to replace nutrients in the soil; building terraces or stone barriers reduces soil erosion and allows rain water to soak into the ground. Sustainable agriculture usually relies on a combination of traditional knowledge with new learning, which needs to be introduced gradually.

In Niger, World Vision has worked with local communities to plant drought resistant and fast growing acacia trees that reduce hunger, boost incomes and improve the environment. The seeds are edible and nutritious and are easily harvested using local technology. The seeds are high in protein and can be processed into flour or sold at the market.

The trees also increase soil fertility and the leaf litter provides organic matter. They also help to stop soil erosion and desertification.

2. Respond to local food shortages

When a critical food shortage or famine occurs, a rapid response is necessary. Often the country imports food, but this may not be enough to reach the people in greatest need. The United Nations (UN) calls for donor countries to pledge aid in food or cash, and non-government organisations (NGOs) like World Vision also decide how they can help by buying grain, providing transport and overseeing distribution. Usually food rations are given to mothers, who are responsible for feeding the whole family.



In 2006, flooding in China affected 160,000 people and killed 30. Here a boy and his grandmother carry bags of rice distributed by World Vision.

For many years World Vision has worked with communities in Ethiopia to help improve agricultural skills and assist growers to access sustainable markets through fair trade. Then, in 2006, Jasper Coffee and World Vision released a Fairtrade coffee from the region to sell on the Australian market – improving the farmers' living conditions through better and fairer prices.

For you to do

1. If there is enough food produced in the world for everyone, suggest reasons why hunger and famine exist.

2. Suggest reasons why droughts in rich countries don't lead to large scale hunger and famine.

3. Encourage other income earning choices

For families who own no land, or live in towns and cities, growing their own food is often not a realistic goal (although some urban families can have productive vegetable gardens). If steady jobs are also scarce, setting up a small business with a loan may be a good way to become self reliant.

4. Support fair prices for farmers

If farmers are not paid enough for their crop, there is little incentive to produce a surplus. Even if they are, subsidies paid to farmers in the USA and Europe have prevented developing countries from competing on world markets. Australian NGOs, through the Make Poverty History campaign, have argued for fairer trade in agricultural products which would mean that food producers in developing countries are less disadvantaged.



Ten year old Mikreu shows off a basket of Ethiopian coffee beans.