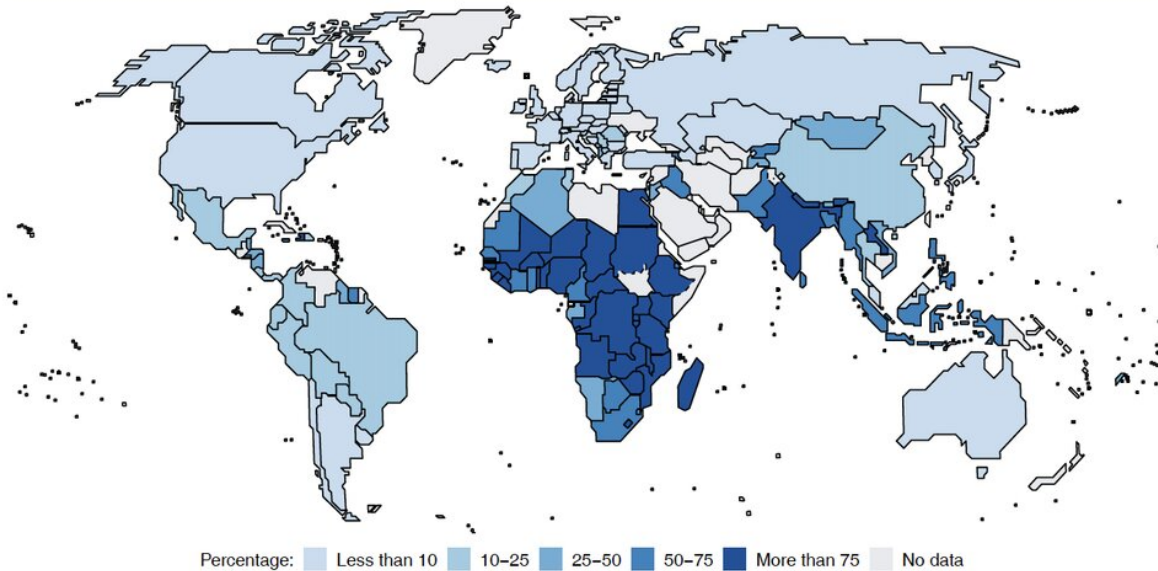


# 'Too many people, not enough food' isn't the cause of hunger and food insecurity

April 12 2022, by Gisèle Yasmeeen

Figure 2  
Percentage of population that cannot afford a healthy diet<sup>a</sup>



Source: FAO and others, The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020.

<sup>a</sup> The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. The final boundary between South Sudan and the Sudan has not yet been determined. The dotted line represents approximately the line of control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties.

Despite adequate food production globally, poverty and inequality restrict many people's access to healthy food. Credit: FAO, The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020, [CC BY](#)

Nearly [one in three people in the world did not have access to enough food in 2020](#). That's an increase of almost 320 million people in one year

and it's expected to get worse with rising food prices and the war trapping wheat, barley and corn in Ukraine and Russia.

Climate change related floods, fires and extreme weather, combined with armed conflict and a worldwide pandemic have magnified this crisis by affecting [the right to food](#).

Many assume [world hunger](#) is due to "too many people, not enough food." This trope has persisted since the 18th century when economist [Thomas Malthus](#) postulated that the [human population](#) would eventually exceed the planet's carrying capacity. This belief moves us away from addressing the root causes of hunger and malnutrition.

In fact, inequity and [armed conflict](#) play a larger role. The world's hungry are disproportionately located in Africa and Asia, in conflict-ridden zones.

As a researcher who has been working on [food systems](#) since 1991, I believe that addressing root causes is the only way to tackle hunger and malnutrition. For this, we need more equitable distribution of land, water and income, as well as investments in sustainable diets and peace-building.

## **But how will we feed the world?**

The world produces enough food to provide every man, woman and child with [more than 2,300 kilocalories per day](#), which is more than sufficient. However, [poverty and inequality](#)—structured by class, gender, race and the impact of colonialism—have resulted in an unequal access to the Earth's bounty.

Half of global crop production consists of [sugar cane](#), maize, wheat and rice—a great deal of which is used for [sweeteners and other high-](#)

[calorie, low-nutrient products](#), as feed for [industrially produced meat](#), biofuels and vegetable oil.

The global food system is controlled by a handful of transnational corporations that produce [highly processed foods](#), containing [sugar, salt, fat and artificial colors or preservatives](#). Overconsumption of these foods is [killing people around the world](#) and taxing healthcare costs.

Nutrition experts say that [we should limit sugars, saturated and trans fats, oils and simple carbohydrates and eat an abundance of fruits and vegetables](#) with only a quarter of our plates consisting of protein and dairy. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change also recommends a move toward [sustainable healthy diets](#).

A [recent study](#) showed that overconsumption of [highly processed foods](#)—soft drinks, snacks, breakfast cereals, packaged soups and confectionery items—can lead to negative environmental and health impacts, such as Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disorders.

Steering the world away from highly processed foods will also lessen their negative impacts on land, water and reduce energy consumption.

## **We live in a world of plenty**

Since the 1960s, [global agricultural production has outpaced population growth](#). Yet the Malthusian theory continues to focus on the risk of population increases outstripping the Earth's [carrying capacity](#), even though [global population is peaking](#).

Nobel Laureate [Amartya Sen's study of the Great Bengal Famine](#) of 1943 challenged Malthus by demonstrating that millions died of hunger because they didn't have the money to buy food, not due to food shortages.



Hunger is [aggravated by armed conflict](#). The countries with the highest rates of food insecurity have been ravaged by war, [such as Somalia](#). More than half of the people who are undernourished and almost 80 percent of children with stunted growth [live in countries struggling with some form of conflict, violence or fragility](#).

UN Secretary General António Guterres has warned that the war in Ukraine puts 45 African and least developed countries at risk of a "[hurricane of hunger](#)," as they import at least a third of their wheat from Ukraine or Russia. According to the *New York Times*, [the World Food Program has been forced to cut rations to nearly four million people](#) due to higher [food prices](#).

What works, ultimately, are adequate [social protection floors](#) (basic social security guarantees) and [rights based "food sovereignty" approaches that put communities in control of their own local food systems](#). For example, the [Deccan Development Society in India](#) assists rural women by providing access to nutritious food and other community supports.

To address food insecurity, we must [invest in diplomacy](#) by coordinating humanitarian, development and peacekeeping activities to avoid and curtail armed conflicts. Poverty reduction is part of peace building as rampant inequalities [serve as tinderboxes for aggression](#).

## **Protecting our ability to produce food**

Climate change and poor environmental management have put collective food production assets including soil, water and pollinators [in peril](#).

Several [studies over the past 30 years](#) have warned that soil and water contamination from high concentrations of toxins such as pesticides, dwindling biodiversity and disappearing pollinators could further affect

the quality and quantity of food production.

Livestock, crop production, agricultural expansion and food processing account for [a quarter of all greenhouse gas emissions](#). In addition, [one-third of all food produced is lost or goes to waste](#), so [tackling this travesty](#) is also paramount.

[#Foodwaste](#) is a major cause of hunger globally. To be a part of [#ZeroHunger](#), make [#NotWasting](#) your way of life.  
[pic.twitter.com/UQIOFbfqeX](http://pic.twitter.com/UQIOFbfqeX)

— World Food Programme (@WFP) [May 15, 2016](#)

Reducing food loss and waste will help reduce environmental impacts of the food system, as will transitioning to healthier, sustainably produced diets.

## **Food, health and environmental sustainability**

Food is an entitlement and should be viewed as such, not framed as an issue of [population growth](#) or inadequate food production. Poverty and systemic inequalities are the root causes of food insecurity as is [armed conflict](#). Keeping this idea central in discussions about feeding the world is essential.

We need policies that support [healthy and sustainably produced, balanced diets](#) to address chronic diet-related disease, [environmental issues and climate change](#).

We need more initiatives that enable equitable distribution of land, water and income globally.

We need policies that address [food insecurity](#) through initiatives like

rights-based food sovereignty systems.

In areas affected by conflict and war, we need policies that [invest in diplomacy](#) by co-ordinating humanitarian, development and peacekeeping activities.

These are the key pathways to recognize that "[food is the single strongest lever to optimize human health and environmental sustainability on Earth.](#)"

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Citation: 'Too many people, not enough food' isn't the cause of hunger and food insecurity (2022, April 12) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-04-people-food-isnt-hunger-insecurity.html>

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