



Food and Agriculture  
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**KEY MESSAGES**

**AFRICA**

**REGIONAL**

**OVERVIEW OF**

**FOOD SECURITY**

**AND NUTRITION**

**CONTAINING THE DAMAGE OF ECONOMIC  
SLOWDOWNS AND DOWNTURNS TO  
FOOD INSECURITY IN AFRICA**

## CONTAINING THE DAMAGE OF ECONOMIC SLOWDOWNS AND DOWNTURNS TO FOOD INSECURITY IN AFRICA

In the 2017 and 2018 editions of the *Africa Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition*, FAO reported that the prevalence of undernourishment was rising in the region. The latest data shows that the deterioration has slowed, but there remain 256 million hungry people in Africa today. The upward trend in undernourishment over the 2014 to 2018 period in Africa is confirmed by the rise in the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity, a complementary indicator of food insecurity introduced by FAO in 2017. This measure also shows that in addition to the 277 million people in Africa who are severely food insecure, there are 399 million people who are moderately food insecure, i.e. they did not have regular access to nutritious and sufficient food, even if they were not necessarily suffering from hunger.

The report further documents that although many African countries are making progress towards reducing malnutrition, progress is too slow to meet six key nutrition targets, which form part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) monitoring framework and the World Health Assembly global nutrition targets. In particular, progress is weakest for stunting and wasting in children and for anaemia in women of reproductive age.

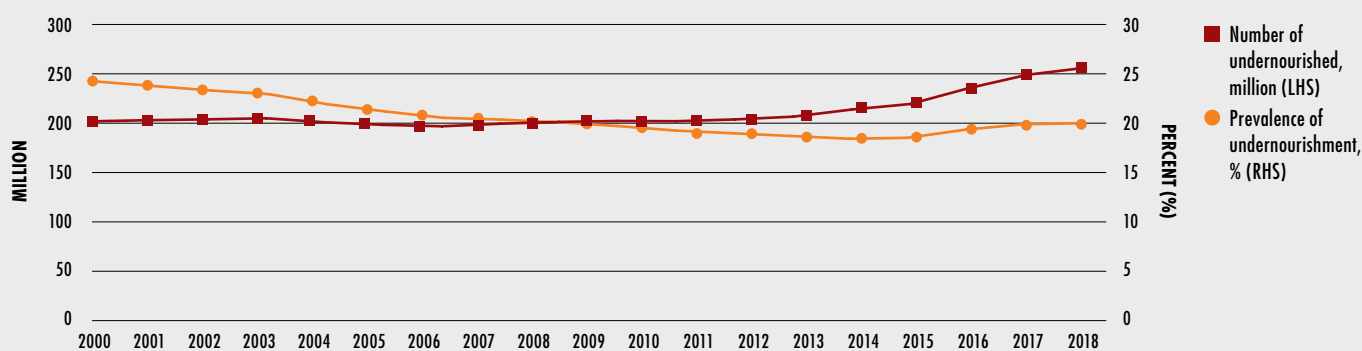
Food insecurity has been rising in Africa in recent years and the continent is not on track to eliminate hunger by 2030. The 2017, 2018

and this year's report identify and report in detail on conflict, climate extremes and economic slowdowns and downturns as the key drivers of the rise in food insecurity.

In most cases, the economic slowdowns and downturns that contributed to rising undernourishment in 2014–2018 were the result of commodity price falls. The experience of the food price shock of 2010–2011 shows that effective policy tools are available and that countries use them. However, while many policy tools are available in theory, and there is concrete evidence they work, in practice their adoption will depend on the availability of fiscal space to effect the desired policy action. Increasingly countries are adopting social protection programmes to address poverty and food insecurity, and the experience of Ethiopia and Kenya shows that such programmes, when adequately designed, are also effective instruments to respond to shocks.

In the longer-term, countries must develop policies and invest to achieve a more diversified economy and achieve an inclusive structural transformation. The recently ratified African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCFTA) provides new opportunities for trade and investment and is of particular importance in this regard. However, sustained economic growth is not enough: reducing inequalities, including gender-based and

### THE PREVALENCE OF UNDERNOURISHMENT IN AFRICA HAS BEEN ON THE RISE SINCE 2014, AND IS BACK TO THE 2008 LEVEL



SOURCE: FAO



spatial inequalities, is essential to strengthening household resilience, laying the path to inclusive growth and reducing food insecurity and tackling the multiple forms of malnutrition.

Addressing acute and chronic malnutrition also requires both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive approaches that are multisectoral in nature. Policies and interventions must focus on promoting nutrition-sensitive food systems that can promote and sustain healthy and diverse diets. Policy makers should put particular emphasis on maternal and child malnutrition and health in the first 1 000 days, both as a moral imperative but also as a high return investment.

The key drivers of the rise in undernourishment in 2014–2018, conflict, climate shocks and economic slowdowns and/or downturns often overlap. In some cases, they are directly interlinked, and in all cases, they worsen poverty, food insecurity and nutrition outcomes. Central to addressing the threat from these shocks are building and strengthening household and national level resilience and some policy instruments, and interventions and programmes are relevant across the three drivers. Many different sectors and actors are involved, and successfully addressing the food security and nutrition challenges countries, communities and households face requires policy coherence and integrated, cross-sectoral planning and implementation of policies and actions. ■

## KEY MESSAGES

➔ After a long period of improvement, hunger in Africa – as measured by the prevalence of undernourishment – worsened in 2014–2018. This trend slowed in 2017–2018. Today 256 million Africans, or 20 percent of the population, are undernourished. Of these, 239 million are in sub-Saharan Africa and 17 million in Northern Africa.

➔ There is significant variation in the levels and trends of hunger in Africa's subregions. The prevalence of undernourishment has for the past 18 years been highest in Eastern Africa and Central Africa, indicating persistent constraints in terms of availability and access to food. However, over the 2014–2018 period, the trend in the prevalence of hunger worsened the most in Western and Central Africa, for the most part due to conflicts, climate extremes and economic slowdowns, sometimes combined.

➔ In this year's report, a second indicator for monitoring SDG Target 2.1 – the Prevalence of Moderate or Severe Food Insecurity based on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) – is introduced. Whereas severe food insecurity is associated with the concept of hunger, people experiencing moderate food insecurity face uncertainties regarding their ability to obtain food and have been forced to compromise on the quality and/or quantity of the food they consume.

➔ This broader measure of food insecurity shows that in Africa, the number of people that are severely food insecure is broadly in line with the number of people that are undernourished. However, an additional 399 million people were found to be moderately food insecure, i.e. they did not have regular access to nutritious and sufficient food, even

if they were not necessarily suffering from hunger. Of these, 87 percent live in sub-Saharan Africa.

➔ Despite a slowing in the upward trend in hunger, the food insecurity situation remains a challenge and food crises continued to affect millions of Africans in 2018. The 2017 and 2018 edition of the *Africa Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition* highlighted the importance of climate extremes, linked in particular to the 2014–2016 El Niño phenomenon, and conflicts as key drivers of the deteriorating food security situation. These two factors continued to be the main drivers of food crises in 2018. Conflict left 33 million people in 10 countries in Africa in 2018 in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. Another 23 million were in need of assistance due to climate shocks, while 10 million people were acutely food insecure due to economic shocks.

➔ Nutrition outcomes are generally improving across Africa, but at a very slow rate. Too slow in most countries to meet the SDG – and World Health Assembly (WHA) – global nutrition targets for stunting, wasting and overweight in children under the age of five, or for low birthweight, exclusive breastfeeding and anaemia in women of reproductive age.

➔ Very few countries are on track to achieve the SDG target of a 40 percent reduction in the number of stunted children. Although the prevalence of stunting in children under five is falling at the regional level, the number of stunted children is rising, reaching 58.8 million in 2018. Economic growth is necessary to reduce stunting, but alone it is not sufficient, and nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions are also needed.

**KEY MESSAGES** continued

→ This edition of the report presents estimates on low birthweight for the first time. These indicate that in 2015, 13.7 percent of babies born in Africa had low birthweight. If current trends continue, the 2025 WHA target of a 30 percent reduction in the prevalence of low birthweight will not be met.

→ In many African countries, overweight and obesity is a rising threat to the health of children and adults, compounding the challenges posed by widespread undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies. In particular, Northern and Southern Africa suffer a high burden of obesity. Policy interventions must focus on the entire food system (which encompass the entire range of actors and their interlinked activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products) to promote healthy diets that include more fruits and vegetables and less energy-dense processed foods and sugary drinks.

→ The most critical period for interventions for maternal and child health and nutrition are in the first 1 000 days. The effectiveness of a variety of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions is well documented. With strong political commitment and investment in complementary health services, safe drinking water and good sanitation, maternal and child malnutrition can be reduced significantly. Doing so is not only a moral imperative but would yield very high economic returns in the future.

→ Three major drivers of hunger and food insecurity are climate change, conflict and economic slowdowns and downturns. In most cases, the recent economic slowdowns and downturns were triggered by falling commodity prices, often leading to currency depreciation and staple food price inflation as well as lower government revenues available for social sector spending.

→ In addition, inequalities in income and in access to basic services and assets, as well as social exclusion, prevent many from benefiting from economic growth. At the same time, they worsen the impact of a slowdown and/or downturn for large parts of the population. In particular, gender inequalities perpetuate intergenerational poverty and malnutrition. Reducing inequalities is essential to strengthening household resilience, laying the path to inclusive

growth and reducing food insecurity. Furthermore, addressing food insecurity, through building human capital and strengthening access to and use of basic services also helps to reduce inequality.

→ But what can countries do? Countries' responses to the soaring food prices in 2007–2008 and 2010–2011 show that many tools are available to policy makers and that these can effectively reduce the negative welfare impacts of food price shocks on consumers. However, these tools are often expensive and distortional and can have negative consequences for trading partners.

→ Economic resilience must be strengthened to safeguard food security and nutrition against economic adversity. This will require short- and long-term policies and programmes.

→ In the short term, countries need to protect incomes and purchasing power in the face of economic hardship. A wealth of evidence shows that social protection – in particular cash transfers, school feeding and public works programmes to reduce unemployment – is effective when well designed and implemented, at reducing poverty and food security as well as strengthening household resilience, building human capital and stimulating farm and non-farm activities. In addition, it is important to have in place health sector policies that protect the poor against catastrophic out-of-pocket healthcare costs as well as policies aimed at reducing excessive volatility of food prices.

→ In the longer term, countries need to invest to reduce economic vulnerabilities and inequalities; build capacity to withstand shocks; maintain health and other social expenditures; and use policy tools to create healthier food environments. This requires balancing a set of policies and investments to achieve an inclusive structural transformation that diversifies the economy away from commodity dependence, while fostering poverty reduction and more egalitarian societies.

→ But countercyclical measures and investment require savings! It is critical to strengthen savings capacity when the economy is growing, using available instruments, such as automatic fiscal stabilizers, stabilization funds, sovereign wealth funds, macro-prudential norms, and the like. It is critical to invest these savings wisely!