

JOHANNESBURG, 24 October , 2010 - Inadequate access to water, recurring floods and droughts as well as a lack of political will to invest in small-scale agriculture perpetuate hunger across Africa, the continent's food security experts say.

They are responding to the 2010 Global Hunger Index (GHI), published in mid-October, which shows that 29 countries in the world have hunger levels that are considered alarming or worse. Twenty-two of these - more than two thirds – are located in sub-Saharan Africa.

The GHI – a 100-point system calculated based on the proportion of people who are undernourished, the percentage of children under five who are underweight and countries' child mortality rates – is published annually by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and Irish charity Concern Worldwide.

Africa's score has improved slightly over the past 20 years, from 25.3 points in 1990 to 21.7 points in 2010, but at this rate, there is no way that Africa, as a continent, will achieve Millennium Development Goal to halve hunger by 2015.

"There's a lack of progress," warns Marie Ruel, director of IFPRI's poverty, health and nutritional division, noting that it is of particular concern that, in some African countries, the percentage of hungry people has increased over the past years.

Hunger persists

According to the index, the Democratic Republic of Congo has the highest proportion of people facing hunger of any country in the world, followed by Chad, Eritrea and Burundi. The DRC also has the highest proportion of undernourished people – three quarters of its population – and one of the highest child mortality rates in the world.

Burundi, the Comoros and Eritrea are not much better off, with half of their populations undernourished.

One of the key reasons for hunger in these countries is prolonged insecurity due to war, the report notes, but there are also many other factors that contribute to food insecurity, such as limited access to water, lack of investment in agriculture and the effects of climate change.

In the case of Burundi, for example, a key reason for food insecurity is poor water management, which is undermining the country's agricultural sector, believes Professor Sheryl Hendriks, a researcher at the Department of Agricultural Economics, Extension and Rural Development at the University of Pretoria in South Africa.

"Lack of water management means that in a country of inadequate water, like Burundi, food production is not efficient," she says.

Due to starvation, more than half of Burundi's children are stunted, according to the GHI.

Madagascar, Malawi, Ethiopia and Rwanda report similar levels of stunting, while Chad, Angola and Somalia are faced with under-five mortality rates of more than 20 percent due to hunger.

Low production levels

Like in Burundi, low agricultural production is the reason for widespread hunger in Eritrea, where recurring droughts and the planting of landmines in farming areas after a two-year war with Ethiopia, which ended in 2000, have caused food insecurity, according to the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP).

In its most productive years, Eritrea only produces 60 percent of its cereal needs and relies on imports for the rest, reports the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). In unproductive years, cereal production drops to 25 percent of demand.

Similarly, in Chad, farming, which is already limited due to its dry climate, has been undermined by a succession of wars, with 80 percent of the population relying on food aid, according to the WFP.

War has also raged within the borders of the DRC since 1996, causing food prices to jump by 52 percent between May 2008 and June 2009, according to the WFP, well beyond the affordability of most Congolese. Humanitarian aid remains scarce in the most war-ravaged parts of the country, particularly in its North Kivu Province.

Only a few African governments have managed to improve food security in their countries, mainly through increased investments in agriculture. Ghana, for example, managed to improve its index rating from 23.4 in 1990 to 10 this year, according to the GHI.

Hendriks believes Ghana is the first African nation on track to achieving MDG 1.

"[Ghana] invests in agriculture, school feeding programmes and information systems and capacity," she says, adding that Ghana's government also successfully focuses on subsidising small-scale farmers.

Ethiopia, Angola and Mozambique also made progress towards reducing hunger, although all three countries' food security situation remains "alarming" with scores of 29.8, 27.2 and 23.7, respectively, according to the report.

No quick fixes

Food security experts recommend that other African nations follow Ghana's example to invest in agriculture, cautioning that there is no quick fix for reversing food insecurity on the continent.

Although short-term assistance to fight hunger, for example through food aid, is necessary to handle unforeseen food shortages, African governments need to focus on implementing long-term strategies to boost agricultural production, says Dr Joyce Chitja, acting director of the African Centre for Food Security at South Africa's University of KwaZulu-Natal.

"It is important to make sure that hunger relief initiatives and food aid are gradually replaced by the normalisation of agricultural productivity," she explains, noting that governments need to "revive and re-establish agricultural productivity".

Hendriks agrees that food insecurity on the continent can only be solved if African countries produce enough food to feed their populations: "The solutions to food insecurity in Africa lie in increasing agricultural production and productivity [with regard to] crops, livestock and fisheries, [combined with] improved access to markets and infrastructure."

Source: [IPS](#)