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Measuring Hunger: A Response to the FAO

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The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) created a stir last October with its revised estimates of global hunger. After revising the methodology used in its annual State of Food Insecurity (SOFI) reports, the FAO reported that the number of hungry had not surpassed one billion following the 2008 food price spikes, as previously reported. Indeed, the new estimates showed barely an upward blip during the food price spikes. Moreover, new trend lines based on revised estimates of past hunger suggested significant progress in reducing the incidence of hunger.

“New estimates show that progress in reducing hunger during the past 20 years has been better than previously believed,” the FAO concluded, “and ... given renewed efforts, it may be possible to reach the MDG hunger target [of halving world hunger] at the global level by 2015.”

Now, a group of hunger researchers led by Frances Moore Lappe, and including Triple Crisis bloggers Jennifer Clapp, Robin Broad, and Timothy A. Wise, have published a detailed critique of the SOFI 2012 estimates and report. “Framing Hunger: A Response to ‘The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2012,’” offers recommendations to the FAO, as much in relation to the presentation of its hunger estimates as on the methodology itself.

Key recommendations include:

- The estimate represents a lower-bound because it is based on food availability and the caloric requirements required only to lead a “sedentary lifestyle.” A less restrictive FAO threshold leads to an estimate of 1.33 billion hungry in the world rather than SOFI 2012’s widely cited 868 million.
- The words hunger, food insecurity, and chronic undernourishment are used interchangeably, but the FAO methodology is designed to estimate the latter: undernourishment lasting more than one year.
- Partly for this reason, the methodology is poorly designed to capture the hunger impacts of short-duration events such as food price spikes.
- The focus on global hunger masks wide regional variation. In fact, progress in China and Vietnam alone account for more than 90% of the estimated reductions in the number of hungry people in the world. National success stories – Ghana, Brazil – are lost in the global estimates, as are countries and regions in crisis.

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- SOFI 2012 implies that a return to pre-recession economic growth will allow the world to resume progress in reducing hunger, but this obscures the many other enabling government policies that are needed to harness growth to guarantee the right to food.

“Framing Hunger” has already prompted a very productive dialogue with FAO officials, who share the goal of improving the measurement and eradication of hunger.