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THE CURRENT: What does a new UN report reveal about global hunger and obesity?

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PITA: You're listening to "The Current," part of the Brookings Podcast Network. This week, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization reports that more than a quarter of the world's population now struggles to eat safe, nutritious, and sufficient food.

With us today to discuss this is John McArthur, a senior fellow in the Global Economy and Development program. John, you've been up in New York this past week while the UN was meeting. What can you tell us about the findings of this report?

MCARTHUR: Well, this report provides a complicated message. Part of it sobering, part of it encouraging, part of it downright worrisome. So, the sobering bit, I would say, is looking at the numbers of undernourished people around the world. That's what we generally call hungry people. And that number is probably stayed around steady, if not gotten worse, at a little more than 800 million people around the world who are chronically undernourished. So, that's a source of concern. Why is it that number is only going up when other things actually around the world -- like child mortality, extreme poverty -- are going down? So, that's the first thing, I think.

The second is, if we think about things like stunting that are in here, stunting is actually a sign -- the technical measure is height for age -- and stunting looks to be going down. So, in some parts of the world, the chronic stunting of children who have been exposed to undernourishment for a long, long time, or poor nourishment for a long, long time, seems to be making some progress, even if not enough to eliminate the problem by 2030, which is what the world's agreed to do under the sustainable development goals.

But I would say the other big, worrisome problem in addition to these, perhaps -- certain parts of the world that have got some crises going on and numbers of hungry rising -- is the obesity problem, the over-nutrition or poor nutrition at the other end of the spectrum, which is going up in pretty much every part of the world. And so, we have these twin nutrition challenges happening globally and it's almost paradoxical that 800 million people in extreme problems of undernourishment, and then you have in some places, 20, 30 and more percent of the population grappling with poor nutrition. And it's often because they're eating a lot of volume, but the quality of their calories is really bad because those are the cheapest calories. And so, that is a real health crisis in the making that we'll be paying for decades to come.

PITA: What are some of the factors that are leading into this really complex picture?

MCARTHUR: Well, I think the first thing is we need to understand that better. So, I have publicly called for a bit more of what, in the technical terms would be called a confidence interval, around these estimates. So, how precise are these numbers when we say it's up from 811 million to 821 million people who are undernourished? Is that a pinpoint estimate? Or, is that within the bounds of approximation? I think we need to understand that a little better in each country because we actually do that for other indicators that are in this realm. Like for child mortality, we have kind of high and low estimates, and we take the midpoint, we see, you know, how confident are we in each number. If we can look at that more clearly, we can look at issues like in some parts of the world, in much of the world, that's grappling with extreme poverty.

Food insecurity is often about income insecurity. The poorest people in the world tend to be farmers. So, often it's because they're not growing enough food, which is their livelihood to eat and to sell. But in an increasingly urban population in a lot of the poorest parts of the world, it's because the poorest people can't afford on a reliable basis to buy nutritious food. So, it's ultimately a poverty challenge that a lot of these places are grappling with, but that's the global aspect too. So, one of the interesting things that's coming out in some of the survey data and our colleague Carol Graham has looked at this is, food insecurity in even the high-income countries has been pretty steady at about roughly 10 percent of the population for many years now. And that's a real concern. Why is that? I would say that that's roughly because people are struggling paycheck to paycheck. They're struggling to get quality food. They're struggling to make sure that they can afford food all the time for their families. So, it's the sense of struggle on income that leads to the sense of struggle on food.

PITA: So, also this week the U.N. high-level political forum was meeting, talking about progress toward the sustainable development goals. Can you tell us a little bit more about both what this report means for meeting the ending hunger goal by 2030 and also how some of these other progress in the SDGs are getting together?

MCARTHUR: Well, this hunger goal, or call it the food and nutrition goal, is one of 17 of the sustainable development goals, which range from everything from universal quality education and learning, to health, to successful cities, to energy and safe energy for all, climate change -- you know, a lot of big issues. So, this is just one of many topics that's getting discussed up there. And the secretary general, actually, issued his annual report on how is the world doing across all these SDGs.

And I think one of the interesting bottom lines is -- it's almost a tale of two worlds right now. There is one world, which is the officialdom, where going into these intergovernmental meetings -- one sense is just how hard it is for anyone trying to do anything international right now to make progress because the world is not agreeing on a lot of things. And that doesn't put a lot of wind in the sails for all the intergovernmental efforts. There's still some good things happening, but it's hard. But when you go to the so-called side meetings, where the municipal leaders are getting together, where the business leaders are getting together, where the social entrepreneurs are getting together, where many of the emerging market leaders are getting together, you get a real sense of energy and these sustainable development goals are becoming more and more localized.

I was with people from Hawaii, and Bristol, and Los Angeles, and New York, and people working at the local level, alongside people from India, and others from, I believe, Malaysia were in a meeting, and Colombia, the country of Colombia, and Spain. They were telling all these stories about how they're creating local-level initiatives to connect these goals with what people are grappling with in their communities. And that sense of energy was infectious around how these goals are becoming, ultimately, a common language for how people can feel a sense of shared vision and also, I would argue, shared team. There's a much broader sense of people collaborating and being on the same team to take on the challenges their communities are facing at home.

PITA: That's a bit of good news that we don't hear a lot of. John, what recommendations do you have for us to help tackle some of these trends in hunger revealed by this report?

MCARTHUR: I think there are a few that will vary based on the context. So, in the places that are dealing with humanitarian crises -- we have places like Sudan and Yemen -- where there is emergency response needed to get the food in, to help people who just don't even have food in the market, and to make sure that there is emergency humanitarian assistance available. There are several crises that need that type of effort and it needs the world to respond, to chip in, to make sure that happens.

There are others where we have these persistence of poverty challenges, where it's not the crisis of the day, it's a chronic, long-term problem. That's how we can turn to places like Ethiopia, or even like Brazil, where they've had very proactive so-called social protection programs -- food for work, employment guarantees, even in some places cash transfers, income support systems to make sure people can afford to buy the food when the downturn hits the rainfall or the household. That kind of social protection aspect is really quite important.

And then, I would say on the nutrition side, this challenge of obesity over nutrition and so forth that's coming around the world, we don't yet have the answers. This is an unsolved problem in all countries and this is where I would argue that the sustainable development goals are helpful as a North Star. They're a way for us to check in each of our communities. Now, this isn't just about throw money at the problem. This is about everything from urban planning -- how do we walk, where are our parks, how do we get to work? Are we in cars every day, or are we in public transport? Is exercise available nearby? What's a food desert, where there's no vegetables in my neighborhood? All these things become part of thinking about how do the market actors -- because most people buy their food on the market, not from the government -- work with the public sector actors who might be able to rejig some incentives, to help companies and people think differently about how they might pursue their nutrition and their lifestyle. Then, how do we actually think, "oh gosh, what's working and what's not?" around a common set of metrics so that we can learn from each other to crack this problem.

PITA: Alright. John, thanks so much for being with us today.

MCARTHUR: Thanks so much for having me.