

Poverty



Roughly ten percent of the world's people (767 million in 2018) live in extreme poverty, or on less than \$1.90 per day. Poverty is linked to many global issues, including undernourishment, poor public health, and even issues relating to climate change. The causes of poverty are complex, and many poor communities across the world find themselves stuck in the “poverty trap” – a reinforcing cycle that enables poverty to persist across generations. With world population increasing by over 83 million people every year, how will this growth impact global poverty?

Hunger

According to the U.N., 815 million people in the world are undernourished, up from 777 million in 2015. Continued population growth may increase this number even further, threatening our ability to feed everyone on earth. Arable farmland is a finite resource, and disasters such as droughts or rising food prices can initiate widespread famine – such as happened in the Horn of Africa in 2011.

Undernourishment means more than going hungry; it implies not receiving a steady, varied diet in order to meet our complex nutritional needs. Chronic undernourishment is especially harmful to children, impairing their development and causing lasting health problems that make it difficult for families to break out of poverty.

Community Health

- **Urban growth:** Almost all of the population growth over the next 40 years will be absorbed by urban areas. This rural-to-urban migration occurs when families move to urban areas in search of economic opportunities. Urban infrastructure cannot always keep up with population growth, leading to the development of slums, where families live in crowded, poorly-built housing zones that enable the spread disease and water-borne illness. Nearly one billion people around the world currently live in slums, and this number is projected to double by 2030.
- **Strain on Public Services:** How communities will provide safe drinking water, sanitation infrastructure, and other essential public services to a growing population is an important question. Many areas already struggle to provide adequate medical services; medical spending in Eritrea, for example, amounts to around \$14 a person per year – nowhere near sufficient to cover preventative, emergency, or maternal care. An increasing population will only put further strain on such public services.

Education

Education is an essential component of escaping the poverty trap. However, a rapidly growing population means more students in need of educational resources, and high enrollment costs prevent many children from receiving an education. Currently, there are 61 million children in the world who lack access to primary education and, as a result, will have fewer economic opportunities as adults.

Environmental Degradation

- **Unsustainable agriculture:** As food demand increases, more farms are developing on marginal land (land that is not as favorable to agriculture), requiring more intensive practices that erode topsoil and deplete soil nutrients. These effects reduce future crop yields and make farming less profitable for poor farmers. Draining wetlands for fields or cutting down mangroves for fish farms also have severe consequences, leaving regions without buffer zones against natural disasters such as flooding and hurricanes.
- **Climate Change:** Natural disasters associated with climate change disproportionately affect poorer communities, who often lack the safety nets for dealing with them. Droughts and storms destroy crops, damage infrastructure, and displace families, making it difficult for poorer regions to advance economically.

Inequalities in Wealth and Resources

Income inequality – both between and within countries – slows economic growth while also creating social and political instability. This problem exists even within developed countries, where the income gap is rising. High rates of population growth are linked to income inequality, meaning that as population continues to swell, the gap between the rich and the poor will likely remain substantial. Higher income means greater access to energy and resources, creating a disparity between the amounts of resources consumed by people in different regions. The U.S., as the world’s wealthiest country, consumes a staggering 20 percent of the world’s energy while only accounting for 5 percent of the population. Diets of those living in wealthy countries require more energy to produce because of higher meat consumption and more food waste. While some people struggle to find adequate energy resources and food to survive, others in the world consume far more than what they need.

Poverty and the Future

Despite the troubling statistics on global poverty, improvements are being made. In 2000, the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) created a deadline of 2015 for meeting eight human development goals. One of these, cutting extreme poverty in half, has already been met. Although we weren’t able to meet the goal of universal education by 2015, huge achievements have been made, with the number of children not attending primary school dropping from 100 million in 2000 to 61 million in 2015. While there is still a lot of work ahead, these achievements remind us that conquering poverty is possible, provided that we find ways to use resources more wisely, reduce inequality, and address population growth.

Sources

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