

How many die of famine?

There are two short answers to this question. One is that we don't know and the other that it depends what you mean by "die of starvation".

Obviously in those parts of the world affected by hunger the last thing doctors and government officials do is fill in death certificates setting out the cause of death, and even if they did there would be no guarantee that they would be using the same criteria from country to country. So we are dealing here not with accurate information but with informed guesses based on what statistical evidence there is.

The word "starve" in English has two meanings: it can either mean to die from lack of food or it can mean to suffer from lack of food. An ambiguity can easily arise here: when we say someone dies from lack of food, do we mean that they literally die from not eating (as Bobby Sands and other hunger strikers did) or that they died as a result of some disease from which they might not have died had they not been suffering from lack of food? Clearly the figures for the former are going to be much lower than those for the latter.

Some absurd figures

In the course of the 1981 presidential election campaign in France, Mitterrand went on record as saying that "50 million human beings die from hunger each year" (La Croix, 18 May 1981). It is not too clear how this figure got into circulation but it came to be widely quoted by charitable organisations in France. It was not until a year later that an expert in the field, Professor Joseph Klatzmann of the Institut National Agronomique in Paris, showed how absurd this figure was by pointing out that the total world deaths in 1981 were about 48 million (Le Monde, 24 March 1982)! This refutation of the claim of 50 million deaths from hunger was also incorporated in the second edition of his book *Nourrir Dix Milliards d'Hommes?* ("Can Ten Thousand Million People Be Fed?")

published in 1983, in which he argued that using existing agricultural techniques world food production could be increased two or three times so as to be able adequately to feed every single man, woman and child on the planet and if necessary more, up to the 10,000 million mentioned in the title of his book. So Klatzmann is no defender of the existing capitalist status quo where millions suffer unnecessarily from hunger and malnutrition.

On 5 August 1981 the Guardian claimed in its Third World Review that:

Every year 30 million people die of hunger, more than half of them children under five.

Every year 780 million people are suffering from hunger and malnutrition.

By the end of this decade these figures will have doubled.

At first sight this seems more reasonable since the number of deaths claimed to be due to hunger is at least less than the total number of deaths from all

causes. But on closer examination it too turns out to be absurd.

If 30 million of the 50 million deaths in 1980 were due to hunger this would leave only 20 million for deaths from other causes. If this figure of 30 million deaths from hunger were true, it is logical to assume that all these deaths would have occurred among the 780 million suffering from hunger and malnutrition (the one figure quoted here by the Guardian not open to challenge, if anything it is probably on the low side). If we also assume that the death rate among the remaining 3,650 million of the then total world population of 4,430 million was the same as that in the developed countries - about 9 per 1,000 - this would mean that 33 million would have died in 1980 from causes other than hunger. But this is more than 20 million, so the figure of 30 million can't be right.

As to the claim that by 1990 the number of deaths from hunger will have doubled to 60 million, this is just as absurd as the 50 million figure mentioned earlier, since it too is higher than current estimates for all deaths in the world in 1990.

The basic figures

All estimates of the number of deaths in the world are derived from figures published regularly by the United Nations. These are prepared on the basis of national population statistics. The latest set of figures was published in 1982 under the title *World Population Prospects as Assessed in 1980*. The following Table has been prepared from the statistics given in this document :

	More developed Countries(1)	Less Developed Countries(2)	Whole World
Population	1.131 m	3.301 m	4.432 m
Deaths	10.6 m	39.9 m	50.5 m
Death rate (3) 9.4		12.1	11.4
Deaths under 5s 0.3 m		11.0 m	11.3 m
Deaths under 10s 0.3 m		14.6 m	14.9 m

(1) North America, Europe, USSR, Japan, Australia and New Zealand

(2) Rest of world

(3) Per 1,000 of total population (average 1975-1980)

This table shows:

1) That world population in 1980 was estimated at being 4,430 million.

2) That about a quarter of the world's population live in the developed countries, defined as being Europe, North America, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the USSR.

3) That the number of deaths in the world in 1980 was estimated as being 50.5

million, about 40 million of which occurred among the three-quarters of the world's population living in the underdeveloped countries.

4) That nearly 15 million children under ten years of age died in 1980, all but about 300,000 of them in the underdeveloped countries.

Interpreting the figures

The first point to notice is that the figures often quoted by UNICEF (UN Children's Fund) of 40,000 young children dying a day in the world is correct ($40,000 \times 365 = 14.6$ million). But it should be noted that the Executive Director of UNICEF, James P. Grant, when he first launched this figure in the early 1980s, did not attribute all these deaths to hunger alone. What he actually said was:

every day of this last year more than 40,000 young children have died from malnutrition and infection (The State of the World's Children 1982-3, UNICEF, quoted in Hunger Project Handout . "The 'Other' UN", p.5).

So Grant was not saying that 40,000 children die a day from inanition, from not consuming enough food to keep them alive. Most of them died from parasitic or infectious diseases of one kind or another - which is what you'd expect in fact, since children under ten don't die from natural causes - but he did strongly argue that the spread of these diseases and their effect were made easier and more devastating by the fact that nearly all the children were already suffering from malnutrition in one form or another.

Thus the claim is that 40,000 children a day die from the combined effects of malnutrition and disease. In this form, and only in this form, is the claim correct. If the "and disease" is omitted then it becomes misleading as this would suggest that 40,000 children die a day simply from lack of food - which, factually is just not the case. This clarification allows us to see how a claim such as the Guardian's "every year 30 million people die of hunger" could have got into circulation. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), most people in the underdeveloped countries die of diseases related to inadequate water and sanitation. Thus Susan George in her excellent *How The Other Half Dies* (first published in 1976) writes that

in the Third World 70 per cent of the people die of parasitic or infectious disease for which hunger provides the favourable terrain (Penguin edition, p.32).

On the basis of estimated population and death trends in the mid- 70s when George was writing her book, this would mean that there were then about 25 million deaths in the underdeveloped countries attributable to these diseases. It is easy to see how somebody eager to do something about world hunger, sincere but not too careful about statistics, could turn George's carefully-worded statement into a full-blown claim that 30 million people actually starve to death each year. George herself makes no such claim and is considerably more cautious. In her introduction (in a passage which is also quoted on the back

cover of the book) she writes:

If it takes you six hours to read this book, somewhere in the world 2,500 people will have died of starvation or of hunger-related illness by the time you finish.

This is equivalent to 10,000 deaths a day, or 3.65 million a year, from "starvation and hunger-related illness"; which is a much more defensible figure for the number of people who die because they literally do not have enough to eat, together with those who die from protein or vitamin deficiency diseases like kwashiorkor and beri-beri (as opposed to the parasitic and infectious diseases mentioned earlier),

People do die of starvation (inanition) in the world today (under capitalism there is always a famine somewhere in the world - last year it was North-East Brazil, this year it is Ethiopia) but nowhere near 30 million. To quote such a demonstrably exaggerated figure is to weaken the credibility of those who do so, and is quite unnecessary since the case against capitalism on this question is strong enough without exaggerating. The knowledge, resources and machines exist to provide enough food for every single human being on the planet yet capitalism, because of its property and profit basis, does not allow this to happen, so condemning millions to malnutrition and diseases and, as we shall now see, to preventable death.

Preventable deaths

The second point that emerges from the basic figures is that, if the same health standards (clean running water, vaccinations, regular medical care) applied in the under-developed countries as in the developed countries, then the number of world deaths would be considerably less than they are. Since, from a technological point of view, it is possible both to produce enough food to eliminate malnutrition in the world and to provide adequate water supplies and health care for every man, woman and child on the planet, these deaths can objectively be regarded as being "preventable". They are deaths that can be laid at the door of capitalism in the sense that if society were geared to catering for human needs (as it would be in socialism) they would not happen.

How many such "preventable" deaths can there be each year? A very simple calculation allows us to estimate a minimum figure. As the Table shows, the death rate in the developed countries is 9.4 per thousand while in the underdeveloped countries it is 12.1 per thousand. If the death rate were 9.4 per thousand throughout the world then only 41 million would have died in 1980 compared with the 50 million who are estimated to have died that year.

But this difference of nine million is, as we have said, only the minimum figure for preventable deaths. The death rate depends not only on health and sanitation standards but also on the age structure of the population. Since the population of the underdeveloped countries is on average younger than that of the developed countries the death rate, if the developed countries' health and sanitation standards prevailed throughout the world, would have been lower

than 9.4 per thousand. Calculations based on the figures in the 1982 UN population report referred to above suggest that it would have been between six and seven per thousand. This would mean that world deaths in 1980 would have been as low as 32 million. In other words, that preventable deaths will be of the order of 17 or 18 million a year.

A closer examination of the figures show that most of these preventable deaths are those of young children. If the death rate for children under five and for children under ten had been the same in the underdeveloped countries as in the developed countries, then 10 million children under five and 13.5 million under ten (including the under fives) would not have died.

We can now estimate how many people died in 1980, not "from hunger", but from a combination of malnutrition and parasitic and infectious diseases caused by the conditions under which capitalism forces over half mankind to live: about 17 million, of which about 13 million were children under ten.

A final word of warning. This estimate refers to the year 1980 while the basic statistics on which it was based change as the years go by (for instance, the world population is going up and the world death rate going down). In time then these figures will need to be revised, upwards or downwards, in the light of new statistical evidence. ALB