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2011 Saw Challenges of Hunger and Poverty

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Photo: Worldwatch Institute

The Worldwatch Institute said in 2011 far too many people were living with less than they needed. It says, for example, nearly one billion people were hungry and just as many were illiterate.

Worldwatch Institute's Danielle Nierenberg said while a billion people went to bed hungry each night, it wasn't because of a lack of available food.

"We produce more than enough food in the world to not only feed the 7 billion people who are on earth today, but 9 to 11 billion people. By 2050, we expect the population to be about 9 and a half billion people and we currently produce enough food to feed all of those people. But the question is really one of how do we get food to the people who need it the most. Poverty really impedes the progress of allowing people to eat well. Not just getting enough staple crops, but being able to buy fruits and vegetables and the things that will really nourish them," she said.

Wasted

The director of the Nourishing the Planet Project said besides poverty and a lack of access to food, much food is simply lost. Worldwatch estimates 1.3 billion tons of food is wasted each year.

"Twenty to fifty percent of the global food harvest is wasted before it can ever reach people's stomachs. And this is really a moral problem when you consider all of the people who are hungry

in the world. The good news about that 20 to 50 percent of global food waste number is that it's easy to prevent food waste. We can do it in our homes. Consumers can do a lot to prevent food waste by planning meals better, by not buying too much food. In the developing world there are storage systems that are beginning to be put in place that help farmers protect their food from crop diseases or pests or molds and fungus," she said.



Nierenberg said prevention measures can be put in place all along the food chain.

On the micro level

Part of the problem of malnutrition is a deficiency in micronutrients. A severe lack of Vitamin A, iron and iodine can have lifelong effects. For example, a vitamin A deficiency in children can lead to blindness. An iron deficiency in pregnant women can cause a number of complications.

"One of the biggest problems in the world right now is that we produce a lot of calories. We produce a lot of starchy staple crops, whether it's rice or wheat or maize. And while that keeps people full and fed, and most of the world really depends on those starch staple crops to survive, we're not investing as much in the production of fruits and

vegetables. Those are the things that contain those essential micronutrients," she said.

Nierenberg said a lack of access to nutritious food does not necessarily mean affected people are thin. It can be just the opposite. They can be overweight or even obese.

"People don't have access to healthy, nutritious food. In the United States, we have the highest obesity rates in the world. And this is partly due because many of our citizens don't have access to grocery stores or farmers' markets. They live in what are called food deserts. Places where people have to travel very far to grocery stores. In most of these areas the food comes not from supermarkets, but it comes from liquor stores and convenience stores, where unhealthy foods and processed foods are sold," she said.

Can't read or write

While it may not seem obvious, the Worldwatch Institute project director said malnutrition and illiteracy are closely linked.

"When people, especially farmers, don't have the education that they need to live productive lives, they can't learn new skills. And in sub-Saharan Africa, women farmers, especially, don't have access to education. This prevents them from not only learning new cropping techniques and learning new technologies, it also prevents them from being able to access financial and banking services. They can't have bank accounts. They can't buy land. They can't buy the inputs that they need to make their crops more productive," she said.

Nierenberg said despite the many challenges, Worldwatch is hopeful for the future. She says there are a growing number of innovative projects to address hunger and poverty, while at the same time protecting the environment. These include the World Food Program's homegrown school

feeding initiatives underway in Kenya, Brazil, India, Thailand and other countries. The programs put local food producers in direct contact with schools.