

Global food security under climate change

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This article reviews the potential impacts of climate change on food security. It is found that of the four main elements of food security, i.e., availability, stability, utilization, and access, only the first is routinely addressed in simulation studies. To this end, published results indicate that the impacts of climate change are significant, however, with a wide projected range (between 5 million and 170 million additional people at risk of hunger by 2080) strongly depending on assumed socio-economic development. The likely impacts of climate change on the other important dimensions of food security are discussed qualitatively, indicating the potential for further negative impacts beyond those currently assessed with models. Finally, strengths and weaknesses of current assessment studies are discussed, suggesting improvements and proposing avenues for new analyses.

hunger | vulnerability | food supply | agriculture

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines food security as a “situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (1). This definition comprises four key dimensions of food supplies: availability, stability, access, and utilization. The first dimension relates to the availability of sufficient food, i.e., to the overall ability of the agricultural system to meet food demand. Its subdimensions include the agro-climatic fundamentals of crop and pasture production (2) and the entire range of socio-economic and cultural factors that determine where and how farmers perform in response to markets. The second dimension, stability, relates to individuals who are at high risk of temporarily or permanently losing their access to the resources needed to consume adequate food, either because these individuals cannot ensure *ex ante* against income shocks or they lack enough “reserves” to smooth consumption *ex post* or both. An important cause of unstable access is climate variability, e.g., landless agricultural laborers, who almost wholly depend on agricultural wages in a region of erratic rainfall and have few savings, would be at high risk of losing their access to food. However, there can be individuals with unstable access to food even in agricultural communities where there is no climate variability, e.g., landless agricultural laborers who fall sick and cannot earn their daily wages would lack stable access to food if, for example, they cannot take out insurance against illness. The third dimension, access, covers access by individuals to adequate resources (entitlements) to acquire appropriate foods for a nutritious diet. Entitlements are defined as the set of all those commodity bundles over which a person can establish command given the legal, political, economic, and social arrangements of the community of which he or she is a member. Thus a key element is the purchasing power of consumers and the evolution of real incomes and food prices. However, these resources need not be exclusively monetary but may also include traditional rights, e.g., to a share of common resources. Finally, utilization encompasses all food safety and quality aspects of nutrition; its subdimensions are therefore related to health, including the sanitary conditions across the entire food chain. It is not enough that someone is getting what appears to be an adequate quantity of food if that person is unable to make use of the food because he or she is always falling sick.

Agriculture is not only a source of the commodity food but, equally importantly, also a source of income. In a world where trade is possible at reasonably low cost, the crucial issue for food security is not whether food is “available,” but whether the monetary and nonmonetary resources at the disposal of the population are sufficient to allow everyone access to adequate quantities of food. An important corollary to this is that national self-sufficiency is neither necessary nor sufficient to guarantee food security at the individual level. Note that Hong Kong and Singapore are not self-sufficient (agriculture is nonexistent) but their populations are food-secure, whereas India is self-sufficient but a large part of its population is not food-secure.

Numerous measures are used to quantify the overall status and the regional distribution of global hunger. None of these measures covers all dimensions and facets of food insecurity described above. This also holds for the FAO indicator of undernourishment (1), the measure that was used in essentially all studies reviewed in this article. The FAO measure, however, has a number of advantages. First, it covers two dimensions of food security, availability and access; second, the underlying methodology is straightforward and transparent; and third, the parameters and data needed for the FAO indicator are readily available for past estimates and can be derived without major difficulties for the future.

This article reviews recent studies that have quantified the impacts of climate change on global food security. It starts with an overview of the principal aspects of climate change and their impacts on the four dimensions of food security. It then reviews model-based results and discusses the main findings that have arisen from these assessments. Finally, limitations of the current modeling systems are discussed; this final section includes a discussion of potential surprises and some suggestions to improve future assessments to enhance their overall robustness and their relevance for policy makers.

Climate Change and Food Security

Impacts on Food Production and Availability. Climate change affects agriculture and food production in complex ways. It affects food production directly through changes in agro-ecological conditions and indirectly by affecting growth and distribution of incomes, and thus demand for agricultural produce. Impacts have been quantified in numerous studies and under various sets of assumptions (3). A selection of these results is presented in *Quantifying the Impacts on Food Security*. Here it is useful to summarize the main alterations in the agro-ecological environment that are associated with climate change.

Changes in temperature and precipitation associated with

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Abbreviations: ha, hectares; AEZ, agro-ecological zone; BLS, Basic Linked System; GCM, general circulation model; GDP, gross domestic product; FAO, Food and Agriculture Organization; IIASA, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis; IPCC, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; SRES, Special Report on Emissions Scenarios.

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Working Group II provides a detailed account of the health impacts of climate change in chapter 8 of its fourth assessment report (3). It examines how the various forms of diseases, including vector-borne diseases such as malaria, are likely to spread or recede with climate change. This article focuses on a narrow selection of diseases that affect food safety directly, i.e., food and water-borne diseases.

The main concern about climate change and food security is that changing climatic conditions can initiate a vicious circle where infectious disease causes or compounds hunger, which, in turn, makes the affected populations more susceptible to infectious disease. The result can be a substantial decline in labor productivity and an increase in poverty and even mortality. Essentially all manifestations of climate change, be they drought, higher temperatures, or heavy rainfalls have an impact on the disease pressure, and there is growing evidence that these changes affect food safety and food security (3).

The recent IPCC report also emphasizes that increases in daily temperatures will increase the frequency of food poisoning, particularly in temperate regions. Warmer seas may contribute to increased cases of human shellfish and reef-fish poisoning (ciguatera) in tropical regions and a poleward expansion of the disease (14–17). However, there is little new evidence that climate change significantly alters the prevalence of these diseases. Several studies have confirmed and quantified the effects of temperature on common forms of food poisoning, such as salmonellosis (18–20). These studies show an approximately linear increase in reported cases for each degree increase in weekly temperature. Moreover, there is evidence that temperature variability affects the incidence of diarrhoeal disease. A number of studies (21–24) found that rising temperatures were strongly associated with increased episodes of diarrhoeal disease in adults and children. These findings have been corroborated by analyses based on monthly temperature observations. Several studies report a strong correlation between monthly temperature and diarrhoeal episodes on the Pacific Islands, Australia, and Israel (25–27).

Extreme rainfall events can increase the risk of outbreaks of water-borne diseases particularly where traditional water management systems are insufficient to handle the new extremes (3). Likewise, the impacts of flooding will be felt most strongly in environmentally degraded areas, and where basic public infrastructure, including sanitation and hygiene, is lacking. This will raise the number of people exposed to water-borne diseases (e.g., cholera) and thus lower their capacity to effectively use food.

Impacts of Climate Change on Access to Food. Access to food refers to the ability of individuals, communities, and countries to purchase sufficient quantities and qualities of food. Over the last 30 years, falling real prices for food and rising real incomes have led to substantial improvements in access to food in many developing countries. Increased purchasing power has allowed a growing number of people to purchase not only more food but also more nutritious food with more protein, micronutrients, and vitamins (28). East Asia and to a lesser extent the Near-East/North African region have particularly benefited from a combination of lower real food prices and robust income growth. From 1970 to 2001, the prevalence of hunger in these regions, as measured by FAO's indicator of undernourishment, has declined from 24% to 10.1% and 44% to 10.2% respectively (13, 29). In East Asia, it was endogenous income growth that provided the basis for the boost in demand for food, which was largely produced in the region; in the Near-East North African region demand was spurred by exogenous revenues from oil and gas exports, and additional food supply came largely from imports. But in both regions, improvements in access to food have been crucial in reducing hunger and malnutrition.

FAO's longer-term outlook to 2050 (30) suggests that the importance of improved demand side conditions will even become more important over the next 50 years. The regions that will see the

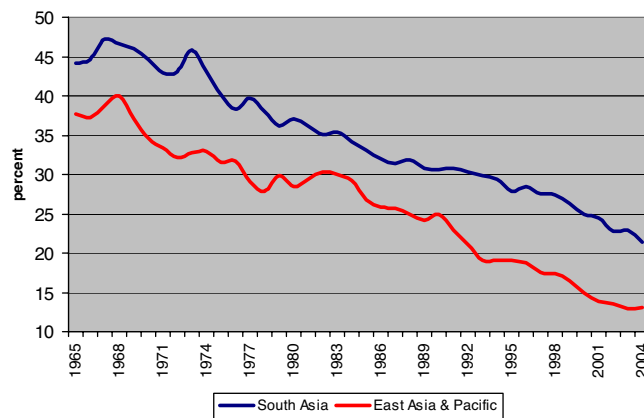


Fig. 1. The share of agriculture in total GDP in many developing countries has rapidly declined over the last decades; it is worth noting that in the high-income Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries today, the share of agriculture in GDP is <2%.

strongest reductions in the prevalence of undernourishment are those that are expected to see the highest rates of income growth. South Asia stands to benefit the most. Spurred by high income growth the region is expected to reduce the prevalence of undernourishment from >22% currently to 12% by 2015 and just 4% by 2050 (30). Progress is also expected for sub-Saharan Africa, but improvements will be less pronounced and are expected to set in later. Over the next 15 years, for instance, the prevalence of undernourishment will decline less than in other regions, from ≈33% to a still worrisome 21%, as significant constraints (soil nutrients, water, infrastructure, etc.) will limit the ability to further increase food production locally, while continuing low levels of income rule out the option of importing food. In the long run, however, sub-Saharan Africa is expected to see a more substantial decline in hunger; by 2050, <6% of its total population are expected to suffer from chronic hunger (30). It is important to note that these FAO projections do not take into account the effects of climate change.

By coupling agro-ecologic and economic models, others (e.g., refs. 9 and 31) have gauged the impact of climate change on agricultural gross domestic product (GDP) and prices. At the global level, the impacts of climate change are likely to be very small; under a range of SRES and associated climate-change scenarios, the estimates range from a decline of –1.5% to an increase of +2.6% by 2080. At the regional level, the importance of agriculture as a source of income can be much more important. In these regions, the economic output from agriculture itself (over and above subsistence food production) will be an important contributor to food security. The strongest impact of climate change on the economic output of agriculture is expected for sub-Saharan Africa, which means that the poorest and already most food-insecure region is also expected to suffer the largest contraction of agricultural incomes. For the region, the losses in agricultural GDP, compared with no climate change, range from 2% to 8% for the Hadley Centre Coupled Model, version 3 and 7–9% for the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation projections.¶

Impacts on Food Prices. Essentially all SRES development paths describe a world of robust economic growth and rapidly shrinking importance of agriculture in the long run and thus a continuation of a trend that has been underway for decades in many developing regions (Fig. 1). SRES scenarios describe a world where income

¶All projected changes in GDP and agricultural GDP are in constant 1990 prices. For further regional and climate-specific details see table 4.11 in ref. 9.

Table 1. The impacts of climate change and socio-economic development paths on the number of people at risk of hunger in developing countries

Scenario	No. of people at risk of hunger in developing countries, in millions					
	Year 2020		Year 2050		Year 2080	
	AEZ-BLS	DSSAT-BLS	AEZ-BLS	DSSAT-BLS	AEZ-BLS	DSSAT-BLS
Reference						
A1	663	663	208	208	108	108
A2	782	782	721	721	768	769
B1	749	749	239	240	91	90
B2	630	630	348	348	233	233
CC						
A1	666	687	219	210	136	136
A2	777	805	730	722	885	742
B1	739	771	242	242	99	102
B2	640	660	336	358	244	221
CC, no CO ₂						
A1	NA	726	NA	308	NA	370
A2	794	845	788	933	950	1,320
B1	NA	792	NA	275	NA	125
B2	652	685	356	415	257	384

Data are taken from refs. 10 and 34. Reference depicts reference projections, under the SRES scenario and no climate change. CC includes climate change impacts, based on Hadley Centre Coupled Model, version 3 output, including the positive effect of elevated CO₂ on crops. CC, no CO₂ includes climate change, but assumes no effects of elevated CO₂. Projections from 2020 to 2080 are given for two crop modeling systems: AEZ and DSSAT (Decision Support System for Agrotechnology Transfer), each coupled to the same economic and food trade model, BLS (3). The models are calibrated to give 824 million undernourished people in 2000, according to FAO data. NA, not available.

growth will allow the largest part of the world's population to address possible local production shortfalls through imports and, at the same time, find ways to cope with safety and stability issues of food supplies (4, 9). It is also a world where real incomes rise more rapidly than real food prices, which suggests that the share of income spent on food should decline and that even high food prices are unlikely to create a major dent in the food expenditures of the poor. However, not all parts of the world perform equally well in the various development paths and not all development paths are equally benign for growth. Where income levels are low and shares of food expenditures are high, higher prices for food may still create or exacerbate a possible food security problem.

There are a number of studies that have ventured to measure the likely impacts of climate change on food prices (e.g., refs. 9, 32, and 33). The basic messages that emerge from these studies are: first, on average, prices for food are expected to rise moderately in line with moderate increases of temperature (until 2050); some studies even foresee a mild decline in real prices until 2050. Second, after 2050 and with further increases in temperatures, prices are expected to increase more substantially. In some studies (32) and for some commodities (rice and sugar) prices are forecast to increase by as much as 80% above their reference levels without climate change. Third, price changes expected from the effects of global warming are, on average, much smaller than price changes from socio-economic development paths. For instance, the SRES A2 scenario would imply a price increase in real cereal prices by $\approx 170\%$. The (additional) price increase caused by climate change (in the Hadley Centre Coupled Model, version 3, climate change case) would only be 14.4%. Overall, this appears to be the sharpest price increase reported and it is not surprising that this scenario would imply a stubbornly high number of undernourished people until 2080. However, it is also needless to say that a constant absolute number of undernourished people would still imply a sharp decline in the prevalence of hunger, and, given the high population assumptions in the SRES A2 world (>13.6 billion people globally and >11.6 billion in the developing world) this would imply a particularly sharp drop in the prevalence from currently 17% to $\approx 7\%$ by 2080.

Quantifying the Impacts on Food Security

A number of studies have recently quantified the impacts of climate change on food security (e.g., refs. 9–12 and 31). In terms of quantifying agronomic yield change projections, these studies are either based on the AEZ tools developed by the IASA analysis or the Decision Support System for Agrotechnology Transfer suite of crop models; all use the IASA-Basic Linked System (BLS) economic model for assessing economic impacts (see, e.g., ref. 34). These tools, with some modifications relating to how crop yield changes are simulated, have also been used by others to undertake similar assessments and provide sensitivity analyses across a range of SRES and general circulation model (GCM) projections. Many other simulations have also examined the effects of climate change with and without adaptation (induced technological progress, domestic policy change, international trade liberalization, etc.), with and without mitigation (e.g., CO₂ stabilization, variants for temperature, rainfall change and distribution) or provide impact assessments for different speeds of climate change (33). This section focuses on the quantitative results for food security, trying to illuminate some of the differences and extract the main messages that emerge from the various studies. Unless indicated, all simulation results discussed below include the combined effects of climate change and elevated CO₂ on crops. The key messages can be summarized as follows:

First, it is very likely that climate change is likely to increase the number of people at risk of hunger compared with reference scenarios with no climate change; the exact impacts will, however, strongly depend on the projected socio-economic developments (Table 1). For instance, it is estimated (9, 31) that climate change would increase the number of undernourished in 2080 by 5–26%, compared with no climate change or by between 5 million and 10 million (B1 SRES) and 120 million to 170 million people (A2 SRES), with within-SRES ranges depending on GCM climate projections. Using only one GCM scenario, others (10, 11) projected small reductions by 2080, i.e., -5% , or -10 million (B1) to -30 million (A2) people, and slight increases of $+13\%$ – 26% , or ≈ 10 million (B2) to 30 million (A1) people.

Second, it is likely that the magnitude of these climate impacts will be small compared with the impact of socio-economic development (e.g., ref. 12). As evident from Table 1, and within the limitations of socio-economic forecasts, these studies suggest that robust economic growth and a decline in population growth projected for the 21st century will, in all but one scenario (SRES A2), significantly reduce the number of people at risk of hunger in 2080. At any rate, the prevalence of undernourishment will decline as all scenarios assume that world population will continue to grow to 2080, albeit at lower rates. Compared with FAO estimates of 820 million undernourished in developing countries today, several studies (9–12, 31) estimate reductions of >75% by 2080, or ≈560 million to 700 million people, projecting 100 million to 240 million undernourished by 2080 (A1, B1, and B2). As mentioned, the only exception is scenario A2, where the number of the hungry is forecast to decrease only slightly by 2080; but the higher population growth rates in A2 compared with other scenarios mean that the prevalence of undernourishment will decline drastically (9–12, 31). However, these analyses also confirm that the progress will be unevenly distributed over the developing world, and more importantly progress will be slow during the first decades of the outlook. With or without climate change, the millennium development goal of halving the prevalence of hunger by 2015 is unlikely to be realized before 2020–2030 (31, 35).

In addition to socio-economic pressures considered within the IPCC SRES scenarios, food production may increasingly compete with bio-energy in coming decades; studies addressing possible consequences for world food supply have only started to surface, providing both positive (36, 37) and negative views (38). Importantly, none of the major world food models discussed herein have yet considered such competition.

Third, sub-Saharan Africa is likely to surpass Asia as the most food-insecure region. However, this is largely independent of climate change and is mostly the result of the socio-economic development paths assumed for the different developing regions in the SRES scenarios. Throughout most SRES and climate-change scenarios sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 40–50% of global hunger by 2080, compared with ≈24% today (9–11, 31); in some simulations sub-Saharan Africa even accounts for 70–75% of global undernourishment by 2080. These high estimates have emerged from slower growth variants of the A2 and B2 scenarios (9, 10); also an A2 variant with slower population growth yields a sharper concentration of hunger in sub-Saharan Africa (12). For regions other than sub-Saharan Africa, results largely depend on GCM scenarios and therefore are highly uncertain.

Fourth, although there is significant uncertainty on the effects of elevated CO₂ on crop yields, this uncertainty is carried to a much lesser extent on food security. This result emerges from a comparison of climate change simulations with and without CO₂ fertilization effects on crop yields. As can be seen from Table 1, higher CO₂ fertilization would not greatly affect global projections of hunger. In view of the fact that essentially all SRES worlds are characterized by much higher real incomes, much improved transportation and communication options, and still sufficient global food production, the somewhat smaller supplies will not be able to make a dent in global food security outcomes (34). Many studies (9–11, 31) find that climate change without CO₂ fertilization would reduce the number of undernourished people by 2080 only by some 20 million to 140 million (120 million to 380 million for SRES A1, B1, and B2 without, compared with 100 million to 240 million with CO₂ fertilization effect). The exception again in these studies is SRES A2, under which the assumption of no CO₂ fertilization results in a projected range of 950 million to 1,300 million people undernourished in 2080, compared with 740 million to 850 million projected under climate change, but with CO₂ effects on crops.

Finally, recent research suggests large positive effects of climate stabilization for the agricultural sector. However, as the stabilizing effects of mitigation measures can take several decades to be

realized from the moment of implementation, the benefits for crop production may be realized only in the second half of this century (12, 39). Importantly, even in the presence of robust global long-term benefits, regional and temporal patterns of winners and losers that can be projected with current tools are highly uncertain and depend critically on the underlying GCM projections (12).

Uncertainties and Limitations

The finding that socio-economic development paths have an important bearing on future food security and that they are likely to top the effects of climate change should not, or at least not only, be interpreted as a probability-based forecast. This is because SRES scenarios offer a range of possible outcomes “without any sense of likelihood” (40). Yet SRES scenarios, like all scenarios, do not overcome the inability to accurately project future changes in economic activity, emissions, and climate.

Second, the existing global assessments of climate change and food security have only been able to focus on the impacts on food availability and access to food, without quantification of the likely important climate change effects on food safety and vulnerability (stability). This means that these assessments neither include potential problems arising from additional impacts due to extreme events such as drought and floods (for a similar critique, also see e.g., ref. 41) nor do they quantify the potential impacts of changes in the prevalence of food-borne diseases (positive as well as negative) or the interaction of nutrition and health effects through changes in the proliferation of vector-borne diseases such as malaria. On the food availability side, they also exclude the impacts of a possible sea-level rise for agricultural production or those that are associated with possible reductions of marine or freshwater fish production.

Third, it is important to note that even in terms of food availability, all current assessments of world food supply have focused only on the impacts of mean climate change, i.e., they have not considered the possibility of significant shifts in the frequency of extreme events on regional production potential, nor have they considered scenarios of abrupt climate or socio-economic change; any of these scenario variants is likely to increase the already negative projected impacts of climate change on world food supply. Models that take into account the specific biophysical, technological, and market responses necessary to simulate realistic adaptation to such events are not yet available.

Fourth, this review finds that recent global assessments of climate change and food security rest essentially on a single modeling framework, the IIASA system, which combines the FAO/IIASA AEZ model with various GCM models and the IIASA BLS system, or on close variants of the IIASA system (e.g., refs. 11 and 42). This has important implications for uncertainty, given that the robustness of all these assessments strongly depends on the performance of the underlying models. There is, therefore, a clear need for continued and enhanced validation efforts of both the agro-climatological and food trade tools developed at IIASA and widely used in the literature.

Finally, we note that assessments that do not only provide scenarios, but also attach probabilities for particular outcomes to come true could provide an important element for improved or at least better-informed policy decisions. A number of possibilities are offered (41) to address the related modeling challenges. One option would be to produce such estimates with probability-based estimates of the (key) model parameters. Alternatively, the various scenarios could be constructed so that they reflect expert judgments on a particular issue. It would be desirable to attach probabilities to existing scenarios. Information on how likely the suggested outcomes are would contribute greatly to their usefulness for policy makers and help justify (or otherwise) policy measures to adapt to or mitigate the impacts of climate change on food security.

