

Hidden Hunger in Indonesia: Indigenous Food Insecurity

by Nikodemus Niko

THE TRADITIONAL FOODS of the Indigenous people in Indonesia are facing a serious threat. The once-dominant diet of staples like sago, tubers, and corn is gradually being marginalized. As local food sources become increasingly scarce, there is an erosion of cultural identity, which is devastating on its own; however, it also paves the way for a looming hunger crisis, one that may unfold silently until it reaches a breaking point.

Hunger in Papua has persisted for decades, becoming an ongoing humanitarian crisis. In 2023 alone, a [BBC News](#) report documented the deaths of 23 people in Amuma District, Yahukimo (Papua Highlands Province) due to starvation. The situation remains dire – according to a [Metro TV News](#) report on August 8, 2024, approximately 7,500 people in Agandugume District are at risk of starvation as prolonged drought and frost devastate local food supplies. Echoing the statement of Prof. Drajat Martianto in [Kompas](#),

Indonesia's greatest nutritional challenge today is not a lack of energy or protein, but rather hidden hunger – a widespread deficiency of essential micronutrients such as iron, iodine, folic acid, zinc, vitamin A, and other vital nutrients.

The classification of hunger levels is based on the Global Hunger Index (GHI), which evaluates four key indicators: the prevalence of undernourishment in the population, the rate of stunting among children under five, the prevalence of wasting in children under five, and the child mortality rate.

The 2021 [Report, Micronutrient Status of Young Children and School-Age Children](#) by the Indonesian Ministry of Health reveals that Indonesian children under 12 years old continue to suffer from micronutrient deficiencies. This concern is further reinforced by Prof. Dr. Rina Agustina, M.Gizi, in her [inaugural speech](#) as a professor at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Indonesia, where she highlighted Indonesia's triple burden of nutritional challenges: undernutrition, obesity, and micronutrient deficiencies (hidden hunger), particularly affecting mothers, children, and adolescents.

An Unfolding Humanitarian Crisis

The 2024 [Global Hunger Index](#) (GHI) reports that Indonesia falls into the moderate hunger category, with a score of 16.9. A moderate GHI score indicates that while the country faces significant nutritional challenges, it is not among the most severe cases. This classification is based on four key indicators: the prevalence of undernourishment in the population, the stunting rate (low height-for-age) among children under five, the wasting rate (low weight-for-height) among children under five, and the child mortality rate.

However, according to this data, Indonesia ranks as the second most food-insecure country in Southeast Asia, trailing only Timor-Leste. This situation aligns with findings from Indonesia's Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2023, which reported that 17.6% of the population experienced inadequate food consumption. This figure reflects the percentage of people whose energy intake falls below the minimum dietary requirement.

Data from Indonesia's [Central Statistics Agency](#) (BPS) in 2023 indicates that several provinces in Papua have some of the highest rates of food insecurity. Among the hardest-hit areas are Deiyai and Paniai Regencies, where food security conditions are deeply concerning. In these regions, access to staple foods is severely limited due to poor infrastructure, challenges in food distribution, and the adverse effects of climate change on local food production systems.

A humanitarian crisis is currently unfolding and is likely to persist in the foreseeable future. The tragic accounts of children and the elderly losing their lives to hunger in the remote regions of Papua Province serve as a stark reminder of the deep failures in the food system – failures that continue to marginalize the most vulnerable populations in isolated areas. This situation underscores the severity of hunger as a persistent threat to Indigenous communities in Papua, demanding immediate and sustained attention to guarantee equitable access to adequate and sustainable food sources.

Hidden Hunger

Hunger is not always visible as an empty stomach or an emaciated body. A lack of access to sufficient nutritious food also leads to hidden hunger – a condition characterized by deficiencies in essential vitamins and minerals. Hidden hunger occurs when a person lacks key micronutrients, particularly iron, zinc, iodine, and vitamin A, despite consuming enough calories. This silent crisis disproportionately affects children in rural and remote areas, including those living in indigenous communities.

For centuries, Indigenous communities have relied on their ancestral lands – forests, seas, and traditional territories – to sustain their families' food and nutritional needs.

However, the expansion of extractive industries, land dispossession, and development policies that disregard Indigenous rights have drastically reduced their food production spaces. As a result, their access to food has become increasingly restricted, leaving them highly vulnerable to malnutrition.

An analysis by the [Linus Pauling Institute](#) at Oregon State University, identified several groups in the U.S. as particularly vulnerable to micronutrient deficiencies. These include individuals from low-income backgrounds, women of reproductive age, the elderly, and Indigenous communities.

Hidden hunger is not just about a lack of food in quantity but also the loss of access to nutritious, high-quality food that indigenous communities have traditionally managed through their own knowledge systems.

Indigenous Food & Traditional Knowledge

Indigenous communities in Indonesia have a deep-rooted tradition of consuming locally sourced food. However, environmental and socio-economic changes are disrupting both the quality and quantity of their nutritional intake, increasing their risk of hidden hunger.

The exploitation of natural resources – through deforestation, mining, and large-scale monoculture plantations like palm oil – has severely restricted Indigenous communities' access to their fertile ancestral lands. This process not only leads to the physical loss of land but also erodes cultural heritage and traditional knowledge related to food management.

Indigenous communities are forced to adapt to a modern economic system that often disregards sustainable practices within their ancestral lands, making food security increasingly fragile. My research in 2024 at Sanggau Regency found that 18% of indigenous territories were converted into palm oil plantations between 2014 and 2023 – a shift that poses a serious threat to the sustainability of local food systems.

Nutritious food once sourced from rich biodiversity is now being replaced by processed foods with low nutritional value. This shift not only contributes to hidden hunger but also undermines food sovereignty.

Indigenous communities and local food systems are deeply interconnected, reflecting a reciprocal relationship between culture and the environment. For the Indigenous People of Dayak Benawan, for instance, the forest serves as their primary source of sustenance – providing firewood for cooking, vegetables, and even game for protein. Local food

is more than just a basic necessity; it represents cultural identity, strengthens social bonds, and serves as a heritage passed down through generations.

Their traditional knowledge – encompassing an understanding of local ecosystems, Indigenous farming practices, and the ability to adapt to environmental changes – is increasingly being displaced by the rise of instant food. Shifting consumption patterns are driven by the easy availability and low cost of processed foods like canned fish, instant noodles, and other convenience products.

Lifestyle changes have also influenced food preferences in Indigenous communities, where instant food is seen as more convenient compared to traditional staples that require more time and effort to prepare. Local vendors have capitalized on this shift, turning it into an economic opportunity.

Recognizing Indigenous Food Systems

Local food is more than just a daily sustenance for Indigenous communities – it plays a crucial role in ecological sustainability and the preservation of cultural values. Therefore, substantive measures are urgently needed – measures that go beyond awareness campaigns. First, formal enactment of the Bill on the Protection of Indigenous Peoples into law should be a priority. Fourteen years in the making, legislators have signalled it may soon be voted on. Such legislation is essential to safeguard the rights and partial landbase of Indigenous communities in Indonesia.

It ensures that food is not merely a means of survival, but also a powerful symbol of resistance and a living expression of cultural identity.

Second, the government's food estate projects must be halted, as they have only deepened the suffering of Indigenous communities and accelerated environmental degradation. These government supported initiatives, designed to promote large scale agricultural practices have disrupted local ecologies and livelihoods, undermining the very communities they claim to support and making food insecurity worse.

Ultimately, to meaningfully address the issue, the Indonesian government must recognize Indigenous food sovereignty by granting legal protection to traditional lands where local communities cultivate and harvest their food sources. This recognition also paves the way for putting an end to environmentally destructive practices – such as palm oil plantations and deforestation – that threaten the sustainability of traditional food systems in Indigenous territories.

CITATION

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