



Ensuring the Human Right to Food Security and Potable Water

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Food Poverty

In many respects, the world is better able to provide food and safe water than ever before. The reduction of poverty, in much of the world has reduced *the proportion* of the world's people suffering from extreme poverty. Most people are eating more, and poverty is less desperate in much the world, most visibly in China, South Asia and parts of Africa. But the *absolute number* of people suffering from deprivation have not declined.

Global increases in agricultural productivity and wealth have helped to raise average per capita consumption by 17 percent over the last 30 years, to a global average of 2760 kcal per day, a period during which world population grew from 3.69 to 7.6 billion people.

Despite such advances in productivity, the world still faces a persistent food security challenge. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that about 815 million of the 7.6 billion people in the world, or 11 percent, suffer from chronic undernourishment and food poverty. Almost all the hungry people live in lower-middle-income countries. But there also are 11 million undernourished people in developed countries.



In this area, as all areas related to development, the UN guides the international community through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As agreed in 2015, the SDG's are designed to eliminate the worst forms of poverty world-wide by the year 2030. Food security is guided by Sustainable Development Goal 2, on achieving Zero Hunger. The specific SDGs include:

- Save lives and protect livelihoods in emergencies,
- Support food security and nutrition and (re)build livelihoods in fragile settings and following emergencies,
- Reduce risk and enable people, communities and countries to meet their own food and nutrition needs,
- Reduce undernutrition and break the intergenerational cycle of hunger, and
- Eliminate hunger, or Zero Hunger, by 2030.

Food poverty here refers to household-level hunger. Households in food poverty do not have enough food to meet the energy and nutrient needs of all of their members. Some households live under conditions of chronic or seasonal food poverty. Other households are pushed into food poverty because of economic change or political challenges which separate them from sources of supply.

Since there is no shortage of food at the global level, all food poverty really means a problem of mal-distribution rather than under-production. The biggest problem is not producing enough, but getting it where it is most needed. How to ensure the poorest people can live better? "Distribution" in this context includes transportation and storage, as well as production patterns and crop choices; it is not simply a matter of shuffling around existing food.



Reducing food shortage at national and sub-national levels is an important tool for reducing food poverty, but not simply because lack of shortage eliminates the necessity of food poverty. Productive and distributive mechanisms - not just food availability - change when there is food shortage.

A special case of food shortage is violent conflict that reduces food availability and changes patterns of food distribution in affected countries. Food imports during times of violence are often restricted by embargoes. During both *international* and *intranational* conflict, governments put a high priority on provisioning the military, which tends to decrease civilian access to food. Although it is theoretically possible for local food production to increase enough to offset the food deficit caused by embargoes and diversion of existing supplies to the military, this usually does not happen quickly enough to avoid increased poverty. It is much more common for internal food production to decrease, because land has been abandoned and livestock sold by agriculturists seeking to avoid being plundered.

Children are the most likely victims of food poverty. It is estimated that undernutrition—including stunting, wasting, deficiencies of vitamins A and zinc, and fetal growth restriction (when a fetus does not grow to its normal weight before birth)—is a cause of 3.1 million child deaths annually or 45 percent of all child deaths. Undernutrition magnifies the effect of every disease, including measles and malaria. The estimated proportions of deaths in which undernutrition is an underlying cause are roughly similar for diarrhea (61 percent), malaria (57 percent), pneumonia (52 percent), and measles (45 percent).¹

The UN estimates additional USD 267 billion annually is necessary to end world hunger by 2030. “There will need to be investments in rural

and urban areas and in social protection, so poor people have access to food and can improve their livelihoods.” Food poverty causes major issues in developed, developing and underdeveloped countries. Three potential areas of consequences of food insecurity at the household level are physical, psychological and socio-familial.

Apart from obvious consequences such as fatigue (depletion) and/or illness related to insufficient food. Food insecurity, along with the health-compromising coping strategies associated with food insecurity, can exacerbate existing disease. Some of these include diabetes, chronic kidney disease, immunological problems. Food insecurity can compound the health challenges and expenses faced by households with children or adults with disabilities, populations at high risk for food insecurity.²

UN Action on Food and Water

Food Security is when people in a region have access at all times to “sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.” And according to the World Food Programme, *Food Security* is defined by three categories:

1. Food Availability
2. Food Access
3. Food Utilization

Food Security can be provided through means of ensuring reliable and safe local farming methods, food importation, etc. According to the Food Aid International foundation, nearly 800 million people “do not have enough food to lead a healthy active life:, with nearly 66 million school children attending class hungry around the world. In 2016, the foundation reported that even in the United States, the wealthiest country on Earth, 41.2 million Americans lived in food-

¹ ‘What is food poverty?’, *Sustain*, n.d., https://www.sustainweb.org/foodaccess/what_is_food_poverty/

² ‘The Impact of Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Poor Nutrition on Health and Well-Being’, *Food Action*,

December 2017, <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-health-impact-poverty-food-insecurity-health-well-being.pdf>



insecure households. 703,000 American children as of 2016 experienced very low food security.³

The causes of food insecurity range from poverty to the broader effects of climate change. “In 2016, El Niño was responsible for conditions of severe food insecurity for 20 million people”, and mass displacement, from political turmoil, such as the migrant crisis and where “Countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Yemen and Venezuela are examples of countries in which political instability is currently affecting food security.”⁴

Eliminating hunger requires both the ability to respond to disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes, as well as disruptions from armed conflict. Solving the problem requires emergency responsiveness and longer term measures to ensure sustainable relief. In the short term, the UN relies on the World Food Program (WFP). The WFP has 5,000 trucks, 20 ships and 92 planes on the move, delivering food and other assistance to those in most need in 85 countries in the world. Every year, the WFP distributes more than 15 billion rations at an estimated average cost per ration of USD 0.31. In emergencies, WFP is often the first international actor on the scene, providing food assistance to the victims of war, civil conflict, drought, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, crop failures and natural disasters. When the emergency subsides, WFP helps communities rebuild shattered lives and livelihoods.

The WFP is the largest humanitarian organization implementing school feeding program worldwide and has been doing so for over 50 years. Each year, WFP provides school meals to 18.3 million children across 65 countries, often in the hardest-to-reach areas. WFP purchases 3 million metric tons of food every year. At least three quarters of it comes from developing countries. WFP works closely

with two other Rome-based sister organizations, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The latter two work more on long-term relief and preparedness. These three organizations also partner with more than 1,000 national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide food assistance and tackle the underlying causes of hunger.⁵

Under the SDGs, the humanitarian aid programs of dozens of UN Member States also work together to achieve immediate goals of disaster preparedness and rapid reaction. The Member States, NGOs and UN organizations (WFP, FAO and IFAD) also coordinate to some degree to achieve longer term goals.

Water Potability is the degree to which drinking water is clean of anything that could cause pollution, infection or anything that can cause disease, and distribution is regular and safe. Potable water usually requires chemical treatment (chlorination) or importation. Whether it comes by pipe, truck or bottle, it also must be available for ready distribution. It is not enough for a country to have safe water sources, the water has to be easily available to the people who need it most.

Water potability is problematic in much of the globe. Usually the problem is worst in rural and slum communities. Sometimes even relatively wealthy areas have pockets of deprivation, such as ‘untouchable’ communities in otherwise well-provided villages of India, tribal regions where government services are scarce, regions afflicted by armed conflict, such as much of Syria and Yemen today.

In Yemen, for example, some thirteen million people, or 50 percent of the population, struggle

³ ‘Food Security Status of U.S. Households in 2017’, *U.S. Department of Agriculture*, September 2018, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx#children>

⁴ ‘2018 World Hunger And Poverty Facts And Statistics’, *World Hunger Education Service*, n.d., <https://www.worldhunger.org/world-hunger-and-poverty-facts-and-statistics/#hunger-number>

⁵ ‘Zero hunger’, *World Food Programme*, n.d., <https://www1.wfp.org/zero-hunger>



daily to have enough clean water for basic necessities.⁶ In turn this has exponentially increased tensions between local tribes in rural portions of the Yemeni countryside. In Myanmar, the Rohingya minority historically had significant trouble finding potable water, and as they have been forced out of the country, as refugees these problems have worsened. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported in 2017 that 62 per cent of water available to Rohingya refugee households is contaminated.⁷

Countries such as Somalia have had a history of not acquiring reliable food security. Somalia has suffered repeated famines, both man made and by natural forces. The UN estimates that today nearly 2.7 million Somali people do not have access to reliable food supplies. Instead some 300,000 Somali children under age 5 are malnourished, including some 48,000 who are severely malnourished and face a high risk of disease and death.⁸

Other International Agreements

The United Nations has time and time again set several goals to ensure that water potability and food security is ensured. Access to potable water is an objective mandated under the SDGs.⁹ The goal has roots going back in the history of UN action of humanitarian development. In November 2002, the UN Economic and Social

Council (ECOSOC) passed a General Commitment, which establishes that “The human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights.” In July 2010, the UN General Assembly passed resolution 64/292, which also reaffirms the human right to safe, sanitized water.¹⁰

In addition to the Sustainable Development Goals, food security too had been addressed directly by the UN at the 1996 World Food Summit, the 2000 UN Millennium Declaration, and repeated documents since.¹¹ For example, the Milan Declaration had called to “affirm the dangerous impact of climate change on food security and call for the 21st session of the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Paris to adopt an ambitious, legally binding and comprehensive international agreement on climate change.”¹² But the 2015 SDGs remain the unsurpassed statement of global expectations.

⁶ Margaret Suter, ‘Running Out of Water: Conflict and Water Scarcity in Yemen and Syria’, *Atlantic Council*, 12 September 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/running-out-of-water-conflict-and-water-scarcity-in-yemen-and-syria>

⁷ ‘UNICEF warns of contaminated drinking water in camps for Rohingya refugees’, *UN News Centre*, 21 November 2017, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/11/636832-unicef-warns-contaminated-drinking-water-camps-rohingya-refugees>

⁸ ‘Somalia’, *World Food Programme*, n.d., <http://www1.wfp.org/countries/somalia>

⁹ ‘The Sustainable Development Agenda’, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>

¹⁰ *International Decade for Action, Water for Life, 2005-2015*, http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/human_right_to_water.shtml

¹¹ ‘Food Security and Nutrition - A Global Issue’, *UN Research Guides*, 26 September 2018, <https://research.un.org/en/foodsecurity/un-milestones>

¹² *Milan Declaration on Enhancing Food Security and Climate Adaptation in Small Island Developing States, in the framework of the SAMOA Pathway*, 2015, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/8537MilanDeclaration.pdf>

Box Feature: Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No. 2**2 ZERO HUNGER****Hunger**

- Globally, one in nine people in the world today (815 million) are undernourished
- The majority of the world's hungry people live in developing countries, where 12.9 per cent of the population is undernourished.
- Asia is the continent with the hungriest people – two thirds of the total. The percentage in southern Asia has fallen in recent years but in western Asia it has increased slightly.
- Southern Asia faces the greatest hunger burden, with about 281 million undernourished people. In sub-Saharan Africa, projections for the 2014-2016 period indicate a rate of undernourishment of almost 23 per cent.
- Poor nutrition causes nearly half (45 per cent) of deaths in children under five – 3.1 million children each year.
- One in four of the world's children suffer stunted growth. In developing countries, the proportion can rise to one in three.
- 66 million primary school-age children attend classes hungry across the developing world, with 23 million in Africa alone.

Food security

- Agriculture is the single largest employer in the world, providing livelihoods for 40 per cent of today's global population. It is the largest source of income and jobs for poor rural households.
- 500 million small farms worldwide, most still rainfed, provide up to 80 per cent of food consumed in a large part of the developing world. Investing in smallholder women and men is an important way to increase food security and nutrition for the poorest, as well as food production for local and global markets.
- Since the 1900s, some 75 per cent of crop diversity has been lost from farmers' fields. Better use of agricultural biodiversity can contribute to more nutritious diets, enhanced livelihoods for farming communities and more resilient and sustainable farming systems.
- If women farmers had the same access to resources as men, the number of hungry in the world could be reduced by up to 150 million.
- 4 billion people have no access to electricity worldwide – most of whom live in rural areas of the developing world. Energy poverty in many regions is a fundamental barrier to reducing hunger and ensuring that the world can produce enough food to meet future demand.



2.1 By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round.

2.2 By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons.

2.3 By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment.

2.4 By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality.

2.5 By 2020, maintain the genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants and farmed and domesticated animals and their related wild species, including through soundly managed and diversified seed and plant banks at the national, regional and international levels, and promote access to and fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge, as internationally agreed.

2.A Increase investment, including through enhanced international cooperation, in rural infrastructure, agricultural research and extension services, technology development and plant and livestock gene banks in order to enhance agricultural productive capacity in developing countries, in particular least developed countries.

2.B Correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural markets, including through the parallel elimination of all forms of agricultural export subsidies and all export measures with equivalent effect, in accordance with the mandate of the Doha Development Round.

2.C Adopt measures to ensure the proper functioning of food commodity markets and their derivatives and facilitate timely access to market information, including on food reserves, in order to help limit extreme food price volatility.

County and Bloc Positions

A major issue for Third Committee is not the basic problem of development for better access to food and safe water, but whether this is a *human right* to be developed by each country under *domestic law*, or a mandate of *international law* required of each country.

While all UN Member States agree on the need for domestic action, and even the worst afflicted

countries welcome foreign financial assistance to support their own national efforts, not all Member States agree there is a right to food and water under international law. Some fear the loss of sovereign control, which could complicate other efforts at building strong and unified governments, or might complicate their efforts to deal with ethnic or religious minorities, giving them a legal tool to reduce the freedom their governments.



In countries where the government uses food as a tool to influence people, or as a weapon of war, for example, a new human right could complicate policy-making. For example, a right to adequate food and safe water would make it more difficult for a country like Myanmar to force minority Rohingya out of the country, or limit the freedom of the Syrian government in its war to take control of predominantly Sunni regions. Many governments regard such behavior as an abomination, with potentially genocidal consequences. Others see it as a cornerstone of sovereignty.

African Union (AU): The 55 member States of the African Union to implement the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP), to support AU Member States in their efforts to align their policies and strategies in support of their agricultural sector. Implementation of various initiatives, such as the livestock production and health, land policy, agricultural inputs and product markets will be accelerated. The “CAADP will promote and facilitate the generation and dissemination of knowledge, innovation and technology for agricultural transformation, including through promoting measures for rural infrastructure development and value addition. Increased efforts will be made towards achieving the goal of 10 percent allocation of national budgets to agriculture through advocacy and other measures. Other measures to facilitate increased productivity of African agriculture will be facilitated.”¹³

Above all, the Member States of the AU welcome more foreign donor assistance, but also seek to minimize the conditions on such aid, to ensure their own governments retain control over its distribution and use, so it does not clash with their own national policy priorities, and they maximize their national authority.

China: has historically suffered periodic famines throughout the establishment of the

country with the later end of the 20th century. As recently as the Great Famine of 1959-61, an estimated 30 to 100 million Chinese died of starvation and malnutrition. Since then China has made enormous economic progress and lifted hundreds of millions of its people from extreme poverty. Of 1.4 billion residents of China, an estimated 400 million remains poor by official definitions, most of them in remote villages where economic development has yet to reach.

The Chinese example is a powerful one for poor countries. China has found more global support for its economic policies, encouraging countries to open their economies to Chinese trade and industry. China encourages countries to undertake comparable economic reform. It strongly supports international action to ensure food and water security. But it also resists efforts to make food and water security an international humanitarian right, preferring that every government remain free to interpret such principles as they wish. Above all, China does not want international principles to become binding law that could be used against the government of China.

The European Union (EU): has established Food Security as one of its key policies, in 2010 where it had recognized the four pillars of food security. The European Union had also promised to “reduce stunting in 7 million children under 5 by 2025 and to mobilize EUR 3.5 billion between 2014 and 2020 to contribute to this goal.”¹⁴ The 28 Member States of the EU are willing to consider establishment of a new right, guaranteed under international law, to ensure all people access to proper nutrition and water. The right could be met through the work of domestic governments and the international community. It would surpass the requirements of the SDGs by establishing not just a goal, but a requirement for actual action by specific governments and institutions.

¹³ ‘Food security’, *African Union*, n.d., <https://au.int/en/au/priorities/food-security>

¹⁴ ‘Food and nutrition security’, *European Commission*, n.d.,

https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sectors/food-and-agriculture/food-and-nutrition-security_en



Non-Aligned Movement (NAM): The 120 Member States of the UN's largest voting bloc, the NAM, work aggressively to maximize support and investment to achieve all SDGs, including food and water security for all. The NAM Member States encourage donor governments, especially those of former colonial and imperialist states, to live up to their responsibilities by maximizing their foreign aid to their formerly exploited subjects. They generally seek maximum assistance, while minimizing the strings often connected with such aid. If food and water security are to become human rights, they expect them to become responsibilities for donor governments, the suppliers of foreign aid, leaving recipient countries free to apply such aid according to their own policy priorities.

Russian Federation: Moscow primarily emphasizes food security at home. On 30 January 2010, the Food Security Doctrine was signed into force by the Russian Federation President Decree. The Doctrine develops provisions of the Strategy for the National Security until 2020, which was approved in May, 2009, in its part that relates to the food security issues. It is in accord with the Concept of Russia's Participation in the International Development Assistance [further referred as Concept], approved by the RF President in June 2007, which presents the policy concerning the provision of international financial, technical, humanitarian and other aid to help, inter alia, resolve crisis situations worldwide caused by natural disasters, including food deficit. Russia strongly supports measures to facilitate global emergency responsiveness and long term planning. It generally does not support measures that would require government to act, except through their own sovereign decision-making. Enhancing the official power and flexibility of each government is a cornerstone of Russian foreign policy

The United States: stress exports rather than aid. It is reducing its foreign aid, including

humanitarian assurance, while trying to increase its agricultural exports, which it believes helps developing countries in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Central and South America. The United States Department of Agriculture monitors agriculture in more than 80 countries, and works to train farmers and officials on health, risk analysis, avoiding harvest loss, and increasing agricultural productivity. Since 2009, the US invested over USD 3.7 billion for the 'Feed The Future Initiative'. The US also founded the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program, 'an international, multilateral trust fund that has already awarded USD 658 million to finance country development plans in 18 low-income countries, with 8.2 million beneficiaries.'¹⁵ Both initiatives are under review by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the White House, casting doubt over their future. Increasingly, American policy stresses the role of business and American food exports as a solution to regional problems.

Proposals for Further Action

As the UN General Assembly debates the question of a right to adequate food and safe water, it faces fundamental issues, not just of providing for the world's poorest and most vulnerable, but also questions of the responsibilities and obligations of governments and international organizations. To achieve global food and nutritional security, commitments and investments are needed to fulfil SDG 2. Some proposals to be considered include:

Accelerate the schedule for eradicating extreme poverty, encouraging Member States and international organizations to spend more and work harder to eliminate the worst hunger before the year 20230, possibly by 2025 or 2022. Finding new funding would be the main challenge.

¹⁵ 'Food security', *U.S. Department of Agriculture*, <https://www.usda.gov/topics/food-and-nutrition/food-security>



Establish a universal human right to adequate food and safe water for all people. This would legally require home government to ensure basic minimum standards for all their residents. For many countries this will be possible only with foreign financial assistance. For others, it may require resolving enduring conflict. In every case, there are tricky questions of who pays and who is responsible. Such a right cannot be separated from problems of funding and implementation.

Establish a responsibility for each country to ensure the food supply and water safety of all their residents. By shifting responsibility to the governments of Member States, the UN would enhance the sovereignty of its Member States. This measure would make governments responsible for their own people, and might be

resisted by poorer countries, unless donor assistance were expanded to meet their needs. Member States also might seek guarantees to assure they will not be vulnerable to prosecution in the International Criminal Court (ICC) if they fail to meet this responsibility.

Raise funding and capabilities of international organizations like the UN World Food Programme to better anticipate and meet food emergencies, and work more effectively prevent future food and water emergencies. Finding funding from Member States would be a principle challenge, since no country is willing to spend more over all. Instead, money probably would have to come from new sources of revenue—new taxes—or be taken from current programs.