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The Security Challenge of Food (In)security

By Franz Fischler | 6 September 2021

Key Issues

- The international community will not meet SDG Zero Hunger in 2030.
- Food security is a problem not of production but of access to and distribution of food.
- Children suffer disproportionately from famine and related diseases.
- Persistent conflicts, economic shocks, and weather extremes are the main reasons for food insecurity.
- Without women there will be no integration of subsistence farmers into the economy.
- Only sustainable fisheries can contribute to food security.
- Food security has become part of international politics as an integral part of security policy requiring the attention of world leaders.

In 2015, the international community decided to eradicate hunger and assure food security by 2030 as part of the UN Sustainable Development Agenda. Unfortunately, this optimism was not sustained with actions and has been fading ever since. This policy brief looks at the current situation of food (in)security, analyses the main reasons for the fading optimism, and explores possible means to regain it.

There is food, but not necessarily where it is needed

Most experts share the view that the world could nourish up to 10 billion people, providing food security for all. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) sees food security realised, “when all people at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious

food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” However, we are faced with food insecurity that affects nearly one third of the world population and shows a growing negative trend, accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis.

The 2021 joint report by FAO, International Fund for Agricultural Development, United Nations Children’s Fund, World Food Program and World Health Organisation, “The State of [Food Security and Nutrition in the World](#)” is appalling – given the potential to feed the world population, the problems of access and distribution as well as the negative effects of climate change must be tackled urgently. This is also a problem of governance, the worldwide distribution of wealth, and the resulting inequality: the rate of food insecurity is three times

higher in Latin America and the Caribbean than in Asia; Africa is left behind with a 70% higher rate than Asia.

The many faces of hunger

There is not only a geographic imbalance of hunger; there is also uneven distribution within the global society, as the impact of food insecurity is harder on those who are already disadvantaged. The [Food Security Information Network](#) has developed a scheme to measure the degree of food security, which is illustrative:

1. Phase I Generally Food Secure: More than 80% of households can meet basic food needs without atypical coping strategies
2. Phase II Borderline Food Insecure: For at least 20% of households, food consumption is reduced but minimally adequate without having to engage in irreversible coping strategies. These households cannot fully meet livelihood protection needs.
3. Phase III Acute Food and Livelihood Crisis: At least 20% of households have significant food consumption gaps OR are marginally able to meet minimum food needs only with irreversible coping strategies such as liquidation of livelihood assets. Levels of acute malnutrition are above normal.
4. Phase IV Humanitarian Emergency: At least 20% of households face extreme food consumption gaps, resulting in very high levels of acute malnutrition and excess mortality; OR households face an extreme loss of livelihood assets that will likely lead to food consumption gaps.
5. Phase V. Famine/ Humanitarian Catastrophe: At least 20% of households face a complete lack of food and/or other basic needs and starvation, death, and destitution are evident; acute malnutrition prevalence exceeds 30%; mortality rates exceed 2/10000/day.

Reasons for expanding hunger and food insecurity

Based on an analysis of 155 million people in 55 states, the [2021 Global Report on Food Crises](#)

identifies as the main reasons for the high severity and numbers of people in Phase 3 or worse: (i) persistent conflicts, (ii) pre-existing and COVID-19-related economic shocks, and (iii) weather extremes.

Military conflicts and terrorism are responsible for two thirds, economic shocks for one fourth, and weather extremes for one tenth of the suffering. Sad footnote: The 2021 report identified the highest number in the report's five-year existence, with the most vulnerable (women and children) suffering most. Two thirds of them are concentrated in only 10 states: Republic of Kongo, Yemen, Afghanistan, Syria, Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Haiti. In most of these countries domestically displaced persons add to the problem. Afghanistan and Haiti both have hit the headlines recently.

First conclusion to draw: the world hunger problem is not primarily due to problems related to agriculture but is politically induced – solutions are first and foremost in the hands of the foreign policy community, followed by the climate change fighters.

Hunger is more than food Insecurity

Acute malnutrition as described in Phase III had already increased before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic: 155 million persons in 55 countries were in this category, an alarming trend. Within one year, 20 million persons had been added to the worst-off categories. Most impacted were people in 39 countries who already had been stuck in that upsetting category since 2016, and who suffered an increase of 60%. The worst hit is again Africa, where in 2020 one fifth of the population suffered from acute malnutrition. This is the double the rate of the rest of the world.

Children are the victims

Children suffer the most from famine and related diseases: In 2020 an estimated 22% of children below the age of five (e.g. 15 million) suffered from "stunting" and another 45 million from "wasting" or acute undernutrition, caused by limited nutrient intake and infection. Over the last 20 years the proportion of children hit by "stunting" was reduced from one third to one fifth, but now it is feared that COVID-19 will break that positive long-term trend.

The role of agriculture and nutrition

It might appear paradoxical that those producing for their own livelihood, the subsistence farmers, are those suffering most from hunger, famine and malnutrition. This is because they are directly impacted by any crisis (crop failure, diseases, damage to food in storage) without any safety net for themselves and their families. Lacking cash, they are often unable to buy replacement food or crops. This problem can only be solved if these subsistence farmers are better integrated in the economic cycle, catering first for the local markets, and become part of agricultural development projects, including gradual industrialisation where possible.

There is agreement among experts that this can only be achieved if women are in the lead, for two reasons: they are already working in agriculture in

may serve as an example: within a few months the price for wheat and rice doubled in the future markets. Egypt, which has subsidised grain for bread production, already was unable to cope with the cost explosion for this staple food, which in turn contributed to the Arab Spring both there and in other countries. The primary victims were the poor, often jobless people in these countries. This direct link between politics and agriculture underlines the need for a comprehensive approach in terms of economic and societal developments; manipulating markets clearly is detrimental to food security.

Fisheries to secure food security

Fish is already an indispensable food for 3 billion people worldwide, with the demand increasing twice as fast as the size of the population. Aquafarming counts for one half of the total production of fish

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addition to running the household and educating children, and – importantly – they are more likely to accept counselling than men.

In order to support this transition, more Official Development Assistance (ODA) funds need to be allocated to agriculture in targeted countries, as the share of agriculture in ODA has been reduced from 20% to 5% over the last 40 years. This was due to the belief that industrialisation could overcome poverty more quickly and effectively.

There is again need for differentiation: Countries depending on the import of foodstuffs – like the Arab countries – are heavily influenced by the development of international markets including commodity speculation. The situation in 2010

and is a growing industry, providing a living for about 60 million people.

If the 1995 Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries – note 1995 (!) - were implemented properly, fish stocks would be in a much better shape. Climate change, increasing acidity of sea water, loss of coral reefs, and changes in sea streams add to the seriousness of the problems in the industry, which already suffers from overfishing, lack of recreation periods, and sound stock management.

Access to fish grounds and the negative effects of the building of artificial islands on life stocking of fish and biodiversity are part of the security problem in the South China Sea.

Food versus fuel

Agriculture and energy production have become a new pairing with strong impact on not only climate change but also food security. While the use of agrarian waste is unproblematic for the production of bio-fuels, bio-gas or direct burning, the large-scale production of energy plants (palm oil, soja) contributes significantly to the deforestation of the rain forests and to mono-cultures with devastating effects on the quality of the soil and biodiversity. Furthermore, plants for energy production enter into direct competition with food production. The policy prescription is clear: Food production has priority over energy production; energy production should take place only if it is sustainable within the whole production cycle. Farming should protect the environment, not use it up.

International trade and division of labour

The EU is still wrongly accused of dumping of agricultural products as part of its Common Agricultural Policy – export subsidies have long been abolished. The problem is a different one: Industrial production in Europe has reduced the unit price for, for example, eggs and poultry to an extent that small farmers in both developing and industrialised countries are no longer competitive. “Land grabbing” is another factor endangering small farmers: large companies or sometimes states, like China, buy land to transform it into large farms. In a number of African and Southeast Asian countries, the state formally owns the land, and farmers only have rights to use the land, with no written title. Therefore, they can be evicted without compensation.

Food security fills the headlines in Europe too

Climate change has brought drought, floods, storms, and late hard frosts to Europe, as well as hitherto unknown plant diseases and pests, causing progressively increasing damage. While not yet impacting on the delivery of foodstuffs, the economic losses have to be mitigated by increasing costs for all kinds of insurance to cover the risk of hail, floods, storms, or other inclement weather. In addition, the use of agricultural land impacts on food security: Too much space is taken out of

agricultural, forestry, or landscaping use and is sealed. Loss of humus also impacts negatively on the ecosystem: water can no longer be stored, thus soil erosion and drought risk increase. In addition, soil life is decreasing and this in turn reduces biodiversity and the soils lose their capacity to absorb carbon dioxide and function as carbon sinks, which are essential to fight climate change successfully. Thus, in addition to raising awareness the legal frameworks and crop management programmes need to be urgently adapted to stop these negative developments.

The clock is ticking

The complexity and interdependence of the problems mentioned show clearly that there is a need not only for international cooperation but an all-government approach in addressing the main causes for hunger, changing agriculture, and the nutritional habits of many. Concerning the latter, meat consumption in developed and emerging countries has to be reduced: If the world population were to eat as much meat as the average European consumer, not to mention the counterpart in the US – the world climate would increase by two degrees from that alone.

The targets for agriculture of SDG2, Zero Hunger, include many necessary actions:

1. The doubling of the productivity and income of small agricultural producers and autochthon people including fishermen, pastoralists, and women. This 2030 goal already failed, as the remaining nine years are too short to reach it. A redoubling of efforts, however, is indispensable.
2. The situation in countries with food shortages needs to be factored into the new orientation of donors of ODA and the innovative redesign of animal and plant production.
3. Education and counselling services need to move up in the priority list.
4. There is a need for structural changes to allow common storage and exploitation of agricultural products inclusive of common use of means of production through (small) cooperatives.

5. Assured access to services, resources, finance, and markets outside the agricultural sector is necessary for farmers to allow adding value to agricultural production and access to labour markets to facilitate diversification.`

In addition, the UN Sustainable Development Agenda foresees sustainable and resilient production methods of foodstuffs – which will not be realised in total by 2030. However, without increases in productivity, caring for ecosystems in improving the quality of soils, and fighting climate change effectively, adapting to the changing climate where necessary food security will remain a distant goal.

No more papers and speeches

Summing up, workable solutions will only be found if there is an integrated and networked approach in a global context. Measures need to be adapted to specific situations – there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

First and foremost, food security has become part of international politics. It is an integral part of security policy: war or war-like situations impact on agricultural production, and food shortages contribute to creating migratory flows. Competition or fights for arable land and water are not historically new sources of friction. They have increased in importance today, aggravated by the consequences of climate change and more recently by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These factors enlarge the wealth gap among states as well as within societies. Unattended, they are potent sources for conflicts endangering domestic

and international peace. The unprecedented spending programmes to overcome the effects of COVID-19 are also a chance for rendering food production more sustainable in making 'smart' use of capital, in addition to investment in digitalisation and global health governance. 'Green deals' like the EU's, which includes the Farm to Fork Strategy, are important.

In 2021 the international community has many calls to meet: the UN 2021 Food Systems Summit, the implementation of the measures agreed by the Food Coalition led by the FAO in response to the described aggravation of the world food crisis and the consequences of the pandemic, COP26 in Glasgow. Another failure, to save the genetical variety of plants and domesticated animals and related wild animal species by 2020, should not only stimulate discussion at the upcoming UN Biodiversity Conference in Kunming/China in October 2021 but should lead to concrete initiatives.

2030 is no longer a distant goal; it is just around the corner. Feeding a growing world population, preserving natural habitat as a basis for food production, and protecting livelihoods related to agri-food production are necessary measures to take. The focus is on measures, not on speeches or papers, in order to put the international community back on track to achieve Zero Hunger. This is no longer a lofty goal for well-meaning activists but a necessary benchmark to preserve peace and security, avoiding a generalisation of Phase V, Famine & Humanitarian Catastrophe. This is a goal well worth the attention of world leaders – food security is part of 'high' politics. Another failure could be the last one.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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This special edition brief is an advocacy plea by former EU Commissioner Fischler in view of important conferences on food security in 2021.



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