



FROM PROMISES TO ACTION STRENGTHENING GLOBAL COMMITMENTS TO FIGHT HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY

IFPRI POLICY BRIEF | JULY 2024

Since the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, heads of state and ministers at global convenings have repeatedly expressed commitments in support of achieving SDG2 – Zero Hunger – by 2030. Yet progress toward SDG2 has stalled, owing to economic slowdowns, unforeseen crises, geopolitical conflict, and lackluster investment in agricultural productivity and open trade.

Where have commitments to SDG2 fallen short? While SDG2 calls for ending global hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition by 2030, this brief predominantly focuses on progress and commitments related to hunger and food insecurity. Drawing on the results of two recent studies, the policy brief (1) discusses trends and setbacks toward reducing hunger and food insecurity, (2) analyzes progress on the “means of implementation,” or mix of finances, technology, and policy choices, to address SDG2, (3) assesses 107 commitment statements in support of SDG2 made at 68 global meetings since 2015, and

(4) explores how to improve accountability in the commitment-making process to accelerate progress toward Zero Hunger.

DISMAL PROGRESS ON HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY

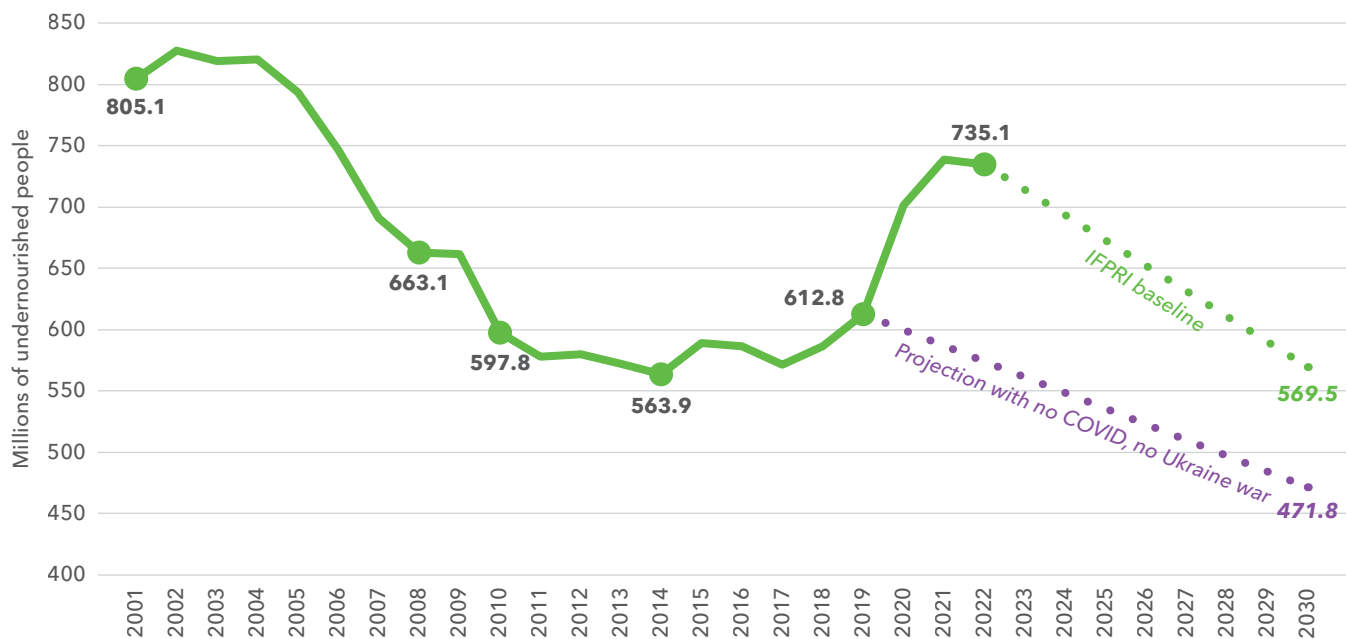
Almost a decade after SDG2 was announced, the world’s progress toward this goal has been slow. Between 2014 and 2022, the number of undernourished people rose from 564 million to 735 million, and by 2030, more than 570 million people are projected to be undernourished (Figure 1). In 2023, more than 3 billion people could not afford a healthy diet.

Several overlapping factors help explain why progress has been challenging. Economic growth in low- and middle-income countries declined in the 2010s, and income per capita has declined in sub-Saharan Africa since 2015. This disappointing growth performance has been compounded by recent global

Suggested citation for this brief: Menon, P., D. Resnick, C. Zorbas, W. Martin, R. Vos, E. Jones, S. Suri, E. Iruhiriye, D. Headey, C. Arndt, and H. Fritschel. 2024. *From Promises to Action: Strengthening Global Commitments to Fight Hunger and Food Insecurity*. IFPRI Policy Brief. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/149046>

This brief is based on Martin, W. and R. Vos, 2024, “SDGs and Food System Challenges: Global Trends and Scenarios toward 2030,” IFPRI Discussion Paper 2237, International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, DC; and Zorbas, C., D. Resnick, E. Jones, S. Suri, E. Iruhiriye, D. Headey, W. Martin, R. Vos, C. Arndt, and P. Menon, 2024, “From Promises to Action: Analyzing Global Commitments on Food Security and Diets Since 2015,” IFPRI Discussion Paper 2238, International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, DC.

FIGURE 1. The world is off track to reach Zero Hunger by 2030



Source: Martin and Vos (2024), based on: FAO et al., *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* (Rome, 2023), Figure 5; and J. Glauber and D. Laborde, “Repurposing Food and Agricultural Policies to Deliver Affordable Healthy Diets, Sustainably and Inclusively: What Is at Stake?,” FAO Agricultural Development Economics Working Paper 22-05, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, 2023.

shocks: the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2022, the global supply chain disruptions and food price hikes of 2021–2022, and the shocks to global wheat, vegetable oil, and fertilizer markets caused by the war in Ukraine. Diet quality has also worsened because of recent shocks. In addition, the world is currently facing the highest number of violent conflicts since World War II, which has further contributed to a resurgence in global hunger.

Soberingly, however, evidence shows that even in the absence of COVID-19 or the Ukraine war, the goal of ending global hunger by 2030 would have remained elusive (Figure 1), suggesting that progress was inadequate even before these recent crises emerged. We anticipate that these challenges are likely to continue as climate change potentially slows growth in agricultural productivity.

LITTLE HEADWAY ON INTERMEDIATE ACTIONS TO ACHIEVE SDG2

All 17 SDGs include different “means of implementation” (MOI) that specify the policy and investment decisions needed to meet each goal. For SDG2,

there are three MOI: (1) increase investment, including through enhanced international cooperation, in rural infrastructure, agricultural research and extension services, technology development, and plant and livestock gene banks, (2) correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural markets in accordance with the mandate of the Doha Development Round, and (3) 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. The sections below highlight that progress on each of these has been underwhelming.

Increase investment and cooperation

Although total absolute investment in agricultural research and development (R&D) has increased in real terms in recent decades, current levels of such spending, especially in low-income countries, are still too low. Agricultural R&D as of 2016 averaged just below 3 percent of agricultural gross domestic product (GDP) in high-income countries and less than 0.5 percent in low-income countries.

One source of financing for increased agricultural R&D spending is the more than US\$800 billion a year that governments allocate to agricultural support measures. Given the shortcomings of food systems around the world, this support is not well aligned with the desired SDG2 outcomes. Moreover, it largely goes to agricultural producers, primarily in forms that affect market prices and distort incentives for producers and consumers. Hence, there is enormous potential for redirecting this vast public support to targeted investments in technologies that both enhance productivity and reduce emissions. This repurposing could deliver “triple wins” for a healthy planet, economy, and people: global welfare and food output would increase, food prices would fall, and healthy diets would become more affordable for many people. Furthermore, global greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture and land use change would drop by about 40 percent.

Correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions

Trade restrictions have been a longstanding challenge in agricultural markets. Powerful interest group pressures result in high average rates of trade protection in many countries, particularly in high-income countries that use a variety of barriers to restrict imports.

In the wake of shocks such as the Ukraine crisis, the COVID-19 crisis, and the 2008 global food price crisis, many governments adopted export restrictions, which reduce the supply of food to world markets just when it is most needed, magnifying the shock-induced increase in world prices. While export restrictions may seem logical to policymakers concerned about ensuring adequate domestic supplies of food, they also have serious disadvantages for the countries imposing them. Once trade is restricted, any shock to the domestic market – such as news about a change in the likely harvest – will affect domestic prices unless the country can absorb the shock using costly changes in domestic stockholding.

Export restrictions are not the only form of market-distorting trade policies that magnify the volatility of

world prices; many countries use changes in import barriers to stabilize domestic prices. Clearly, systematic reform of trade rules is needed to reduce the magnification of price shocks in world markets and their adverse impacts on poor and vulnerable populations.

Adopt measures to ensure the proper functioning of food commodity markets

A certain degree of price volatility is normal in food markets as prices adjust to balance supply and demand for food. Many factors can cause price volatility to become excessive and compromise the role of market prices in allocating resources and real income. Some key influences on price volatility include not only trade policies, as mentioned, but also food reserves, market information, and infrastructure.

Food reserves – stocks of storable food commodities – can play an extremely important role in mitigating price volatility. If, however, stocks are not sufficient to accommodate a negative shock to availability, prices may rise dramatically. This results in a pattern of commodity prices characterized by long periods of decline or stagnation, punctuated by short but intense price spikes.

One important challenge in world markets is knowing the level of stocks. While the Group of 20 (G20)’s Agricultural Market Information System has improved information on stocks and other dimensions of market performance, obtaining good information on stocks remains challenging. The extended debate on public stockholding at the World Trade Organization has yielded little by way of reform.¹

COMMITMENTS TO SDG2 ARE MIXED ACROSS GLOBAL MEETINGS AND SUMMITS

Since the SDGs were announced in 2015, governments across the world have made commitments to actions to address hunger and food insecurity by 2030 at several global meetings, including at the United Nations General Assembly, World Health

¹ See “Public stocks at the WTO,” <https://www.iatp.org/public-stocks-wto>.

Assembly, and G20 summits. Yet, at the midpoint of the SDGs, it remains unclear whether and how much these commitments are being implemented and to what extent such commitments have the potential to address known obstacles to achieving SDG goals on food insecurity and hunger.

Based on an analysis of 107 intergovernmental commitment statements made at 68 global meetings in 9 global forums between 2015 and 2023, we provide a better understanding of progress and bottlenecks to achieving SDG2 commitments. Specifically, this analysis focused on how well these commitment statements incorporate seven dimensions that are key to promoting nutrition impact at scale: (1) vision and goals, (2) scale-up actions, (3) scale-up strategies, (4) capacity to scale up, (5) governance, (6) financing, and (7) accountability (Table 1).²

The analysis found that over time, global meetings have produced stronger statements in support of ending global hunger and malnutrition, but these statements have not been consistently matched by the actions needed to help accelerate reductions in hunger.

Vision and goals

The vision and goals dimension was one of the most commonly included components in the declarations analyzed, though the vision sometimes varied in its alignment with SDG2 over time and according to the type of forum. Non-United Nations forums, in particular, can be more political and reflect the preferences of host countries or members, and the framing of commitments may vary accordingly.

Scale-up actions

Almost two-thirds of commitment statements included at least one of the three SDG2 MOI discussed above, and nearly two-thirds mentioned other MOI. The alignment between some of the scale-up

actions mentioned in the commitment statements and the SDG2 MOI offers some promise for leveraging greater investment in agricultural technology and research to enhance productivity, thereby reversing the negligible investments in this area for low- and middle-income countries that were noted earlier.

Scale-up strategies

Commitment statements endorsed a variety of action plans and scale-up strategies but focused on coordinating mechanisms – such as committees and multistakeholder platforms – to achieve progress rather than outlining a theory of change about how scaling up would occur on the ground. In addition, recognizing global inequities, most global meetings consistently emphasized the need for nationally relevant scale-up strategies and pathways.

Capacity to scale up

Fewer than half of the commitment statements mentioned the need to enhance capacity in efforts to scale up actions to address SDG2. Statements that did mention capacity included the need for greater individual, organizational, systemic, and structural capacity. A great deal of language focused on “strengthening” institutions to facilitate scale-up without explicitly noting how that strengthening will occur or which types of institutions need strengthening.

Governance

Governance – frameworks, institutions, processes, coordination, relationships, and integration across sectors and administrative levels, from global to local – is essential to SDG2. In commitment statements, there is a growing recognition that horizontal coherence across existing initiatives and institutions is pivotal, but further insight on how to ensure this coherence and manage trade-offs is relatively scant.

² This analysis does not include the 2021 United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) or the Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit, as those events were not platforms for negotiation. Rather, both events brought together governments, donors, development agencies, the private sector, and civil society and provided space for all participants to choose the commitments they were willing to make toward meeting global challenges. The UNFSS focused specifically on all SDGs including hunger and malnutrition, and the N4G Summit focused on malnutrition in all its forms. These events do have implications for accountability and monitoring of commitments, as described in the conclusion to this brief.

TABLE 1. Global meetings that commit to progress on SDG2 are falling short on the seven dimensions that can help scale up impact

| Global forum (number of commitment statements since 2015) | Score for each dimension required to scale up impact (number of indicators per dimension) | | | | | | | Total (24) |
|---|---|----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|---------------|--------------------|------------|
| | Vision and goals (3) | Scale-up actions (3) | Scale-up strategies (2) | Capacity to scale up (4) | Governance (5) | Financing (3) | Accountability (4) | |
| UN General Assembly (33) | 2.7 | 2.0 | 0.4 | 0.9 | 2.5 | 1.6 | 2.1 | 12.2 |
| UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (4) | 2.0 | 1.3 | 0.0 | 1.3 | 1.0 | 1.5 | 1.3 | 8.4 |
| UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of Parties (8) | 1.8 | 1.0 | 0.5 | 0.6 | 1.0 | 1.4 | 1.4 | 7.7 |
| World Health Assembly (15) | 2.0 | 0.8 | 0.3 | 1.1 | 0.6 | 0.5 | 2.2 | 7.5 |
| International Fund for Agricultural Development (8) | 0.4 | 0.3 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.4 | 2.5 | 1.4 | 5.0 |
| World Trade Organization (11) | 2.5 | 0.9 | 0.7 | 0.8 | 0.9 | 0.4 | 1.8 | 8.0 |
| Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (9) | 2.8 | 1.7 | 0.6 | 3.6 | 4.0 | 1.2 | 1.3 | 15.2 |
| Group of 7 Summit (9) | 2.6 | 2.0 | 0.0 | 1.7 | 1.9 | 1.6 | 1.7 | 11.5 |
| Group of 20 Summit (10) | 2.6 | 2.8 | 1.6 | 1.6 | 2.3 | 1.9 | 1.7 | 14.5 |

Note: This table reflects 107 intergovernmental commitment statements made at 68 global meetings in 9 global forums between 2015 and 2023. Scores are averages, reflecting the degree to which indicators for each of the seven framework elements and for all elements (total) are present in the commitment statements made in each global forum. Dark green = more than two-thirds of indicators are present; medium green = one-third to two-thirds of indicators are present; light green = fewer than one-third of indicators are present.

Vertical coherence is missing in many instances. Although there was recognition that actions on hunger, food security, and healthy diets at local levels are important, especially in rural settings, commitments did not articulate how they should be translated from global or national levels to local levels.

Financing

Global forums regularly recognized the importance of financing actions to achieve SDG2, placing a major focus on multilateral development banks, public and private financing, and foreign assistance and a

lesser focus on clear costing targets and new avenues for resource mobilization. Without knowing how much investments will cost, how much money will be allocated by different actors to those investments, or forward-thinking approaches to resource mobilization – in addition to repurposing agricultural subsidies and climate financing – these actions remain relatively theoretical.

Accountability

The need for monitoring over time and willingness to be held responsible for actions is visible in the



commitments but varies in nature, with a heavy focus on self-regulation and voluntary accountability mechanisms. Several forums note how they will assess and revisit their commitments, including through annual tracking reports. Others highlight the importance of investing in data systems to monitor progress over time. None of the commitment statements articulated consequences for inaction on promised commitments.

Summary

Table 1 summarizes the findings of the commitments analysis by type of global meeting and domain. The numbers in each cell reflect the average for a global meeting vis-à-vis the corresponding dimension and based on the number of indicators that were used to operationalize that dimension. For instance, since “vision and goals” contains three indicators, the average can range from 0 (lowest) to 3 (highest). As seen in the Table, scale-up strategies have received the least attention across convenings while vision and goals have been the most prominent.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Our findings have implications for the policy advocacy community, for researchers focused on addressing hunger and food security, and for those engaged in catalyzing and supporting intergovernmental action on other SDGs. Several areas for further action and research will be of interest to each of these actors.

First, building on the success of putting food security and poor diets on the global agenda, new advocacy efforts should center around the critical importance of scaling and financing actions to effectively mitigate global hunger and food insecurity. Advancing these goals will require substantial action around the stated MOI related to SDG2 as well as additional actions such as social protection (ideally, that is nutrition-sensitive) to tackle the underlying causes of hunger and food insecurity. Going beyond stated visions and goals, it is indeed time for critical actions to be clearly prioritized, financed, and scaled up. Achieving this will require advocates for SDG2 to align their requests around effective actions, engage widely on these,

and keep up the pressure on financing and accountability for action. Important coalitions can be built among advocates who are working in different policy arenas but concerned with the same outcomes. For instance, mobilizing around reforms to multilateral development banks, identifying replenishment priorities for the World Bank's International Development Association lending facility, and finding innovative debt management approaches (such as debt-for-nutrition swaps) would provide policymakers with a menu of options to scale up financing commitments to SDG2.

Second, in a world of increasing complexity and fragility, governments and policy communities around the world must maintain a relentless focus on meeting critical human needs such as food security and healthy diets. Effective solutions to achieve these goals are within reach, and attention must not waver from financing and scaling what is known to work to solve hunger, food insecurity, and the unaffordability of healthy diets: investments in agriculture, nutrition- and gender-sensitive social protection programs, and humanitarian assistance; broad poverty alleviation strategies; and pro-poor economic growth strategies.

Third, given that monitoring of progress to end hunger, attain food security, and achieve healthy diets is largely voluntary and country determined, data and evidence are needed to monitor commitments being made to SDG2 at global, regional, national, and local levels in a consistent and comprehensive way. The hunger and nutrition advocacy community can play a critical role in collecting and independently monitoring the gap between stated financial and scaling-up commitments and the actual delivery of such efforts on the ground. These efforts could potentially be facilitated through interactive digital or artificial intelligence-supported dashboards, and supported by effective engagement around the use of data to help propel actions forward across all levels and all sectors. This work can capitalize on the commitment-making and tracking momentum that has stemmed from the United Nations Food Systems Summit and draw on models used by the Nutrition for Growth Summit, as well as the Compliance Simulator generated by the University of Toronto, to examine progress on commitments made at G20 meetings.

Fourth, it is critical to advance political economy and institutional analyses of how global governance for food systems could be made more effective for addressing the SDGs. Indeed, better understanding why global actors or national governments may not uphold their commitments in the wake of these global meetings – due to changes in political administrations, lack of bureaucratic capacity to implement, or contradictions with other national policy priorities – is a critical step in determining how these global forums can be better designed to enhance actions and compliance. In 2024, a year when nearly 50 countries are holding elections, global alignment will take additional effort and require advocates to be politically strategic in their engagement.

Overall, our work underscores that even for a well-recognized and acknowledged global challenge for humanity – hunger and food insecurity – for which impactful evidence-based solutions exist, generating sufficient momentum toward implementation remains challenging. As progress toward reducing hunger and food insecurity has stalled or reversed over the past few years, governments have increasingly committed to the vision and goals of reducing hunger and food insecurity as part of the global SDG2 agenda. However, progress remains limited on even the few globally agreed-upon intermediate actions. More tailored effective pathways to national action, supported by global and national governance efforts, should be a key goal to support genuine transformation for millions of people globally who are experiencing hunger and malnutrition.

It is not too late to accelerate progress and achieve the desired impacts on hunger and food insecurity over a reasonable timespan and at a manageable cost. Doing so, however, will require globally coordinated and nationally coherent pathways to action on multiple fronts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This brief was made possible with support from The Rockefeller Foundation. We are also grateful for the input from participants in numerous consultations related to this research. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of The Rockefeller Foundation or the International Food Policy Research Institute.

This publication is peer reviewed.

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1201 Eye St, NW, Washington, DC 20005 USA | T. +1-202-862-5600 | F. +1-202-862-5606 | Email: ifpri@cgiar.org | www.ifpri.org | www.ifpri.info

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