Rising Global Food Insecurity

Abstract

Global food insecurity has been on the rise in recent years, a trend sharply exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and international conflicts. Developing countries in the Global South have been hit the hardest, with millions more people falling into hunger and malnutrition since 2019. This paper examines key drivers of the global food insecurity crisis, including climate change, pandemics, and conflict, and highlights how current aid frameworks often address only the symptoms of hunger. It argues that a paradigm shift is needed: global food aid and security strategies must move away from a deficit-focused approach toward one that builds community-centered resilience and autonomy. By empowering local communities, strengthening sustainable food systems, and addressing underlying structural factors (from poverty and inequality to climate shocks and war), the international community can work toward a more durable solution to end hunger.

Introduction

Global hunger and food insecurity had been gradually rising since 2014, even before the latest crises struck. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed those rates even higher and exacerbated all forms of malnutrition, particularly in children, while the war in Ukraine further disrupted global food supply chains, together creating the worst global food crisis since the Second World War (Martin, 2022). The past few years have been challenging worldwide, but especially for people in developing and least developed countries. In high-income nations, abundant resources and robust safety nets cushioned the pandemic's impact; in contrast, many lower-income countries have struggled to recover. The pandemic alone wiped out "more than four years of progress on poverty eradication," caused a drop in immunization rates for the first time in a decade, and led to a rise in deaths from preventable diseases (Martin, 2022). If that were not enough, developing countries are now "battling record inflation, rising interest rates, and looming debt burdens" that undermine their post-pandemic recovery (Martin, 2022). In this context, global food security has emerged as an urgent concern requiring new strategies and renewed international commitment. This paper explores the major factors driving the rise in global food insecurity and discusses why traditional humanitarian approaches have fallen short. It argues that tackling hunger in a sustainable way will require restructuring aid frameworks to support locally led solutions that build resilience and self-sufficiency in vulnerable communities, particularly across the Global South.

Global Trends in Food Insecurity

To understand the importance of the issue, it is useful to examine recent global trends in food insecurity. Data from before the pandemic showed steady improvement: in 2014, the share of the world's population facing severe food insecurity was relatively low, and even low-income economies were making progress. However, this trend reversed in the late 2010s. By 2019, the proportion of people suffering severe food insecurity had risen

in every region, a change largely traced to the impacts of COVID-19 on the global economy and food supply chains. For instance, South Asia had achieved notable gains around 2015–2017 (thanks in part to a robust Indian economy), but those gains stalled and reversed in subsequent years. Recent assessments make clear where food insecurity is most severe. The Global Hunger Index, for example, shows that the heart of the hunger crisis lies in less economically developed regions, particularly sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Most of sub-Saharan Africa scores in the “serious” to “alarming” hunger range, as does much of South Asia. These areas alone account for roughly two billion people (about one-quarter of the world’s population). Other regions, such as parts of South America and Eurasia, also experience significant food insecurity, though generally less extreme. In contrast, highly developed countries tend to have very low levels of hunger (so low that many do not even appear in Global Hunger Index rankings).

Recent statistics underscore the depth and severity of the problem. In 2020, between 720 million and 811 million people worldwide were suffering from hunger, an increase of roughly 161 million hungry people compared to 2019 (Martin, 2022). This jump of over 20% in the span of one year represents a huge setback in the fight against hunger. Children have been especially affected: globally, about 149 million children under the age of five (22.0%) were stunted (chronically malnourished, leading to low height-for-age) in 2020, and 45 million children (6.7%) suffered from wasting (acute malnutrition, low weight-for-height) (Martin, 2022). In other words, roughly 30% of the world’s young children are experiencing undernutrition. These figures are alarming, as children are the future of society, yet a large portion are growing up without adequate food, which also often accompanies a lack of education and healthcare. It is important to note that the burden of child undernutrition falls disproportionately on less-developed countries, where child mortality rates are far higher than in wealthier countries. Poor infrastructure, weak healthcare systems, and low investment in these regions contribute to a vicious cycle: hunger and malnutrition exacerbate poverty and poor health, which in turn make communities even more vulnerable to food insecurity.

Climate Change and Food Insecurity

Climate change is a critical underlying factor that is compounding global food insecurity. Climate impacts are felt worldwide, but they do not affect everyone equally: they tend to hit developing countries hardest, because those communities often lack the infrastructure and resources needed to adapt quickly. As one report put it, “Climate change is threatening development gains and intensifying global inequities, putting peace and important gains in human well-being at risk” (USAID, 2021). In terms of food production, shifting climate patterns and more frequent extreme weather events are already disrupting agriculture. Rising average temperatures, increasing water scarcity in some regions, higher atmospheric CO2 concentrations, and more frequent heat waves, droughts, and floods all pose direct threats to crop yields (Global Hunger Index, 2019). Smallholder farmers and subsistence farming communities are at especially high risk. As their crop yields shrink and growing seasons become less predictable, these farmers may struggle to produce enough food to feed their families or earn a living. Lower harvests also mean reduced food supply on the market, which drives up prices. As food

prices rise, more poor households are priced out of adequate nutrition, pushing them further into hunger. In short, climate change is not only an environmental problem but also a food security crisis multiplier: it reduces the availability of food while making remaining food more expensive for those already vulnerable.

Climate change also undermines the nutritional quality of the food that is produced. Studies have found that higher concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere can reduce the protein, zinc, and iron content of staple crops (Global Hunger Index, 2019). This means that even when communities can grow or buy food, that food may deliver less essential nutrition than in the past, worsening conditions for populations already on marginal diets. Furthermore, climate change interacts with existing inefficiencies in the food supply chain. In low- and middle-income countries, it is estimated that about one-third of food produced is lost or wasted before it even reaches the market (for example, due to post-harvest losses, poor storage, or transport problems). In high-income countries, a similar proportion of food is wasted at the retail and consumer levels (e.g. thrown away by supermarkets or households). These losses already account for a large portion of unmet food needs worldwide. Climate-related disasters can exacerbate food loss in developing countries by disrupting transportation and storage or by prompting panic slaughter and consumption of livestock, etc., during emergencies. A lack of adequate emergency response systems and infrastructure means that when climate disasters strike, more food is lost in vulnerable regions, exactly when people need it most (Global Hunger Index, 2019). Overall, climate change is stretching the world's food systems to a breaking point, reducing production, weakening nutrition, and magnifying waste, and it is the poorest communities that bear the brunt of these stresses.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Food Security

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global crisis that exposed and intensified vulnerabilities in our food systems. It served as a wake-up call for governments around the world, revealing that even advanced economies were unprepared to handle a shock of this scale. In the aftermath of the pandemic's first waves, observers noted that **humanity is "hitting planetary and social boundaries" — an ecological ceiling and a social foundation beyond which we cannot safely and equitably thrive — "and our food systems are part of the problem"** (Global Hunger Index, 2020). In other words, the pandemic highlighted how unsustainable our current path has been: a rising global population and rising demand for goods have led to overconsumption of resources, environmental degradation (such as soil depletion and pollution), and fragile supply chains. These conditions left societies ill-equipped to ensure food security when a major disruption like COVID-19 struck.

Another critical lesson from COVID-19 has been the importance of social protection systems for food security, and how insufficient those systems were in many countries. Programs to support the vulnerable (such as cash transfers, food assistance, subsidies, and social insurance) are crucial to keep people fed during crises. However, the pandemic plainly revealed that social protection coverage is lacking. According to one estimate, approximately 55% of the world's population has no access to any form of social protection or safety net (Ortiz, 2018). This gap is most pronounced in developing

regions; there has been “significant underinvestment in social protection, particularly in Africa, Asia, and the Arab states” (Ortiz, 2018). As a result, when incomes plummeted and local markets shut down during COVID-19 lockdowns, millions of poor households had no buffer or support, greatly increasing their risk of hunger. The pandemic thus underscored that strengthening social safety nets is a cornerstone of resilience against food shocks.

Pandemic containment measures themselves also disrupted food production and distribution, sometimes in unintended ways. In the rush to slow the virus’s spread, many governments implemented lockdowns and movement restrictions without initially designating agricultural work and food supply services as “essential.” This led to reduced access to farms and markets. Restricted labor mobility, especially in areas dependent on seasonal migrant farmworkers, meant crops went unplanted or unharvested in some regions. Farmers faced difficulties transporting goods, and local markets saw fewer vendors and broken supply chains (Global Hunger Index, 2020). These disruptions “hampered people’s access to essential goods and services” (Global Hunger Index, 2020), especially in communities that rely on informal markets for food. The COVID-19 experience highlighted how tightly interconnected the global food system is: even localized shocks can ripple outward. When agricultural production in one area was interrupted, the effect was felt in food availability and prices across wider markets. If farmers missed a planting or harvest season due to lockdowns, the resulting drop in production could not be easily fixed, leading to higher prices and potential shortages later. In sum, COVID-19 demonstrated both the immediate impact a global crisis can have on hunger and the ways in which underlying weaknesses, from lack of planning to weak social supports, can turn a shock into a prolonged food security problem.

Conflict and Food Security

Conflict is another major driver of global hunger, and its influence has been growing in recent years. It is telling that more than 85% of people experiencing acute hunger crises today live in conflict-affected countries (Action Against Hunger, 2022). Nations torn by war or chronic insecurity tend to have weak structural foundations and high levels of economic informality, resulting in extremely unstable food systems. To understand why, it is important to recognize that “food systems” encompass everyone and everything involved in producing, distributing, and consuming food; they are social systems as much as economic ones. Violent conflict disrupts these systems at multiple points. It directly limits people’s capacity to produce food (farmland may be abandoned or destroyed, farmers conscripted or displaced), to trade (markets can be ruined or made unsafe), and to consume (households lose incomes or are forced to flee without possessions). Conflict also indirectly affects food security by damaging the supporting infrastructure and services that food systems rely on, healthcare, transportation, energy, and governance (Global Hunger Index, 2021). Rural areas, where communities often depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, typically suffer the most when conflict erupts.

War and violence also diminish the ability of governments and formal institutions to respond to food needs. In conflict zones, the reach of national governments is often limited, and formal markets break down. This dual effect severely constrains food

availability. Farmers in war-torn regions struggle to obtain seeds, fertilizer, and other essential inputs, as supply lines are cut and prices skyrocket. Governments may be unable to implement policies like food rationing or price stabilization, allowing shortages and price spikes to worsen unchecked. Communities then turn to whatever means they can to survive, which can include reliance on black markets. Exploitative trading can flourish under these conditions, as scarcity and lawlessness enable a few to profit while the many go hungry (Global Hunger Index, 2021). Conflict, in essence, creates a devastating feedback loop: hunger can fuel grievances and instability, which in turn lead to further conflict and displacement, driving even more hunger.

Unfortunately, conflict-related hunger is a growing concern. In the past decade, all forms of conflict (including civil wars, insurgencies, and intercommunal violence) have increased dramatically. The number of active non-state conflicts worldwide grew by 148% between 2010 and 2020, and by 2020, global military spending and arms transfers had reached their highest levels since the end of the Cold War (Wezeman, 2021). These trends suggest that without significant peacemaking efforts, conflict will continue to be a leading cause of famine and food crises. Ending wars and fostering stability must be part of any comprehensive strategy to end hunger. Simply put, where there is conflict, there is a high risk of hunger, and today's conflicts are numerous and protracted. Addressing the problem of food insecurity, therefore, requires not only humanitarian food aid but also concerted political action to prevent and resolve conflicts.

Discussion and Policy Recommendations

Addressing the complex drivers of food insecurity requires a holistic, long-term approach. Rather than treating only the visible symptoms of hunger, policies must confront the structural causes and build the capacity of communities to withstand shocks. In particular, experts advocate a shift toward supporting **community resilience and self-sufficiency** in the Global South. The following policy recommendations highlight key strategies for restructuring food security frameworks in line with that goal:

- **Support local adaptation and food sovereignty in vulnerable communities.** Governments and international donors should invest in context-specific adaptation measures for populations at high risk of food insecurity (Global Hunger Index, 2019). For example, supporting small-scale farmers with climate-resilient crops and techniques can help increase food production and nutrition at the community level. Diversifying agricultural production, improving farmers' access to extension services and markets, and developing rural off-farm livelihoods are all ways to reduce reliance on any single crop or income source. Strengthening local and regional food markets is also critical. This can include helping farmers organize cooperatives, ensuring fair farm-gate prices for their products, and improving linkages between rural producers and urban consumers. Such efforts enhance food sovereignty, the ability of people to control their own food systems, and reduce dependence on volatile global supply chains.

- **Tailor interventions to local contexts and engage community organizations.** There is no one-size-fits-all solution to hunger. Policies or programs that succeed in one country or region cannot simply be copied and pasted to another without

adjustments for local realities. As the Global Hunger Index report notes, understanding local context is crucial because perceptions of risk and the best paths to peace and food security can vary dramatically along ethnic, cultural, regional, or political lines (Global Hunger Index, 2021). Humanitarian aid agencies, governments, NGOs, and private donors should therefore coordinate closely with community-based organizations when designing and implementing food security initiatives. Working with trusted local groups helps ensure that interventions are culturally appropriate, reach the most vulnerable populations, and preserve local ecosystems (Global Hunger Index, 2020). In practice, this might mean involving community leaders in planning the distribution of food aid or adapting nutrition programs to reflect local diets and customs. When communities have a voice in solutions, those solutions tend to be more effective and sustainable.

- **Address conflict through political action and uphold accountability.** In conflict-affected regions, purely humanitarian responses are not enough; there must also be efforts to resolve the conflicts themselves and protect the human rights of those caught in the middle. The international community, including the United Nations and member states, should strengthen enforcement of international humanitarian law and hold perpetrators accountable for violations. This is especially urgent in cases where starvation is used as a weapon of war or where warring parties block humanitarian aid. Using diplomatic pressure and legal mechanisms to penalize those who deliberately inflict hunger can deter such tactics (Global Hunger Index, 2021). National governments and global institutions must also hold all food-system actors (from armed groups to corporations) legally responsible for respecting people's right to food and for avoiding environmental harm. Stronger accountability, for example, imposing heavy fines or sanctions for destroying food supplies or polluting water sources, can help protect vulnerable communities and deter exploitative practices (Global Hunger Index, 2020). Ultimately, pursuing peace and justice is a necessary component of building food security in conflict settings.

- **Expand social protection and public services to build resilience.** Governments should treat social safety nets and essential services as investments in national resilience. As learned during COVID-19, robust social protection can buffer populations against shocks and prevent a slide into hunger. Policies to consider include establishing or extending **universal health coverage**, unemployment insurance, cash transfer programs for the poor, and food assistance or school meal programs for children. Special attention should be given to empowering rural youth and the urban poor through job training and education, so they are better equipped to secure livelihoods (Global Hunger Index, 2020). Access to maternal and child healthcare is also crucial for preventing malnutrition in the most vulnerable age groups. Donors and international financial institutions can support low-income countries in financing these programs, seeing them as critical infrastructure. To ensure these social programs function effectively and equitably, implementation should involve local institutions and community oversight. Collaboration with grassroots organizations

(such as village councils, women's groups, or faith-based groups trusted by the community) can help make sure aid reaches those who need it most and that benefits are distributed fairly (Global Hunger Index, 2020). By building comprehensive social safety nets and public services, countries can significantly increase their people's ability to withstand crises, whether pandemics, natural disasters, or economic downturns, without falling into severe food insecurity.

Conclusion

The world is facing a dire food security situation. Now more than ever, collective action and innovative thinking are required to address this compounding crisis. Global hunger, particularly in developing and least-developed economies, has persisted for decades despite international efforts. In fact, the problem has worsened in recent years. A key reason is that traditional humanitarian aid has operated largely under a **"deficit paradigm,"** focusing on filling immediate shortfalls, feeding the hungry, and treating malnutrition, without fully addressing why those conditions exist in the first place. While such aid saves millions of lives and remains essential, treating the symptoms of food insecurity will not, by itself, stop new cases of hunger from arising. As this paper has argued, a paradigm shift is needed. The very systems that produce and distribute food must be transformed and made more equitable. Hunger and malnutrition are the manifest symptoms of deeper structural issues: **inequity, climate change, conflict, disasters, and poverty**, among others. When these underlying factors persist, they will continuously generate food crises and new waves of malnourished children. The only lasting solution is to reshape the broken system itself, rather than perpetually responding to its outputs.

In practical terms, this means moving away from viewing vulnerable communities simply as aid recipients and instead empowering them as active agents of change. Global aid and food security frameworks should be restructured to support **community-centered resilience and autonomy**. By investing in local capacities, from climate-resilient agriculture to strong social safety nets, communities can better withstand shocks without sliding into famine. This systemic approach also calls for tackling injustices that fuel hunger, such as gender inequality, land rights issues, and global market imbalances that disadvantage small producers. International initiatives like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on climate change provide a platform for cooperation, but their objectives must be pursued with the most vulnerable populations in mind. Ultimately, combating hunger will require aligning economic development, climate action, and peacebuilding with the goal of food security for all. If the world commits to placing vulnerable communities at the center of food policies, empowering them to shape their food systems and address the root causes of insecurity, then it will be possible to reverse the rising tide of global hunger and build a more food-secure future for generations to come.

References

Action Against Hunger. (2022, October 23). *Conflict drives hunger*. Action Against Hunger. https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/the-hunger-crisis/the-causes-of-hunger/conflict/

Global Hunger Index. (2019). *Global Hunger Index: The challenge of hunger and climate change.* Concern Worldwide & Welthungerhilfe. https://www.globalhungerindex.org/pdf/en/2019.pdf

Global Hunger Index. (2020). *Global Hunger Index: One decade to zero hunger , linking health and sustainable food systems.* Concern Worldwide & Welthungerhilfe. https://www.globalhungerindex.org/pdf/en/2020.pdf

Global Hunger Index. (2021). *Global Hunger Index: Hunger and food systems in conflict settings.* Concern Worldwide & Welthungerhilfe. https://www.globalhungerindex.org/pdf/en/2021.pdf

Martin. (2022, November 7). Goal 2: Zero Hunger , United Nations Sustainable Development. United Nations Sustainable Development. https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/hunger/

Ortiz, I. (2018, December). The case for universal social protection. *Finance & Development* Magazine. International Monetary Fund. https://www.imf.org/Publications/fandd/issues/2018/12/case-for-universal-social-protection-ortiz

United States Agency for International Development (USAID). (2021). *Climate adaptation & resilience for food & water security.* USAID. https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Climate-Adaptation-for-Food-Water-Security.pdf

Wezeman, P. (2021, March 15). *Trends in international arms transfers, 2020*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). https://www.sipri.org/publications/2021/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2020