

# SPOTLIGHT

## MOVING TOWARD PEOPLE-CENTERED MONITORING OF THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND NUTRITION

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The human right to adequate food and nutrition is the bedrock of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS), the premier forum for international discussion and decision-making regarding issues that affect food security. All CFS recommendations and outcomes must be congruent with this right. So far, mainly the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) has been monitoring the right to food and nutrition during its periodic reviews, while food security—an essential outcome of achieving the right to food and nutrition—is still assessed poorly. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015 brought new international attention to food security indicators; food security is part of Goal 2: “End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.”<sup>2</sup> After explaining how the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has tried to improve measurement of food security over the past few years, this article introduces a new project to monitor some of the major determinants of food sovereignty as an approach to monitoring the right to food and nutrition.

Until 2013, the primary metric for measuring food insecurity in the FAO’s annual flagship publication, the *State of World Food Insecurity* (SOFI), was the Prevalence of Undernourishment (PoU). But PoU is a crude aggregated measure of chronic severe caloric deficiencies for an entire country, hardly a measure of food security, which “exists 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.”<sup>3</sup> Use of the PoU resulted in seriously underestimating the real extent of food insecurity due to short-term or seasonal shortcomings, discrimination that prevented women or marginalized sub-populations from accessing food, and so-called ‘hidden hunger’ (vitamin and mineral shortages).

In recognition of the problems with the PoU metric, the FAO introduced new indicators in SOFI 2013, including proxies for vulnerability and shocks in addition to multiple indicators of food availability, access and utilization. Although these additional data provided a more nuanced picture of the status of food insecurity, their interpretation in SOFI 2013, 2014 and 2015 revealed assumptions of a neo-liberal bias for free trade, industrialized agriculture, export-oriented agriculture and mainstream economic development as pathways to food security. Ending hunger by 2030, achieving food security and improved nutrition, and promoting sustainable agriculture require a clear road toward these goals, based on evidence, not assumptions. Over the past year, the FAO has piloted a Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) to assess anxiety over food and food deprivation. These data will be extremely valuable to track the status of food insecurity, but country results are not yet available and may be politically sensitive, if they contradict earlier assessments of hunger.

Concerns over how progress toward food security will be tracked in the future are based in part on the uninspiring track record of how the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and SOFI used hunger data, in addition to the used metric (PoU). Over a time period that included massive price volatility, increasing global inequality,

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2 For more information on the SDGs, please visit: [sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300](http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300).

3 European Commission (EC), FAO. *An Introduction to the Basic Concepts of Food Security*. Rome: EC—FAO Food Security Program. 2008. Available at: [www.fao.org/docrep/013/al936e/al936e00.pdf](http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/al936e/al936e00.pdf).

and increasing vulnerability of food production due to climate change, the official FAO report claimed that food insecurity had shown dramatic decreases and MDG1 (to halve hunger) had been achieved in 72 countries, with others on track to achieving this goal.<sup>4</sup> The implication was that even more neoliberal policies were in order because they were working so well. Lying with statistics is easy; drawing the wrong inferences because data are not disaggregated by country, gender or sub-population or because the wrong things are measured is even easier.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has laudable aspirational goals but it remains fundamentally embedded in prioritizing national economic growth over achieving human rights for each person. It sets the clock back by framing human rights as ‘needs’, opening dangerous avenues for their commodification. This is especially pernicious given the significant influence of corporate actors in shaping the 2030 Agenda and the pervasive belief in many UN forums that the private sector holds the key to SDG implementation. Goal 2 includes nothing about the right to food and nutrition, thus missing alignment with the CFS and ignoring substantial evidence that implementation of this right has resulted in significant improvements in food security.<sup>5</sup> The 2030 Agenda and SDGs have been swept up in the ‘data revolution’, in which quantifiable data manipulated by technocratic data ‘experts’ are seen as the main, if not only, path to knowledge. The emphasis in proposed SDG indicators has been on measurement of outcomes, rather than monitoring the ways in which these outcomes are achieved.

Human rights-based approaches, in contrast, require an assessment of food insecurity and malnutrition that is centered on the knowledge and direct participation of people, particularly those most affected by these challenges. They also require that the process by which people achieve food security is assessed, e.g. through monitoring whether a multi-actor body capable of determining food policies exists, and whether there is supportive legislation for unions of food workers and farm workers to promote livable wages. Moreover, it is equally important to document examples of congruence with the right to food and nutrition, for instance its legal recognition and recourse to redress violations in court. Data from some metrics proposed as SDG indicators are relevant to the right to food and nutrition, but without these key elements of human rights-based approaches (participation, focus on process as well as outcomes, explicit legal recognition of the right to food and nutrition and recourse to violations), the SDGs cannot point to the best ways to achieve this right or even food security.

Monitoring progress is essential in order to know whether government agencies and non-governmental organizations working on hunger, food insecurity and the right to food and nutrition are on the right track. It is essential to choose metrics for this monitoring that reflect people’s experience, allow comparison between different approaches to food insecurity, and adhere to human rights-based approaches. To achieve the right to food and nutrition, food systems need fundamental transformation. It is also paramount that the voices of the primary contributors to food security—who incidentally also suffer the worst consequences of food insecurity, but have not been heard sufficiently—are heard; they should participate at each step. Pressure from vested interests that profit from the ‘status quo’ explain a great deal about the over-reliance on metrics by some countries. However, metrics reveal very little about feasible pathways to ending hunger and how this goal can be met cost-effectively through more democratic governance, agroecology and food sovereignty, without increasing dependence on predatory lending and imports of expensive inputs.

4 FAO. “Seventy-two countries achieve the MDG target to halve proportion of hungry people.” Rome: FAO, June 7, 2015. Available at:

[www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/292551/icode/](http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/292551/icode/).

5 Sano, Hans-Otto and Birgitte Feiring. *A Human Rights Review of the Proposed SDG Priority Indicators*. Copenhagen: Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2015. Available at: [www.plan-academy.org/mod/data/view.php?id=18&rid=196](http://www.plan-academy.org/mod/data/view.php?id=18&rid=196).

Disentangling the industrialized agribusiness agenda from real progress toward the realization of the right to food and nutrition is a vital step in transforming food systems to serve those who suffer from hunger and food insecurity.

### *INSIGHT Peoples' Monitoring for the Right to Food and Nutrition* *FIAN International*<sup>6</sup>

The vast majority of violations of the right to food and nutrition are associated with acts of commission and omission of governments and with abuses carried out by transnational corporations (TNCs). These acts of violence take a variety of different forms: land grabbing, forced evictions, child marriage and gender-based violence, bonded labor, abusive utilization of agrochemicals by agribusiness with detrimental consequences to health and the environment, criminalization of social movement leaders and human rights defenders, ocean and fisheries grabbing,<sup>7</sup> abusive marketing of junk food, and furthering climate change. These violations lead to hunger, malnutrition, loss of livelihoods and reduction in the quality of life. They reflect the lack of peoples' sovereignty over their own lives and bodies, and states that are indifferent to peoples' needs and priorities.

In the face of these challenges, peoples, communities and grassroots groups have organized in different ways to resist the increasing level of violence perpetrated by the powerful global and national elites. More recently, efforts have intensified to build a convergence of struggles that departs from local, national and regional processes. Examples include the Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles<sup>8</sup> and other peoples' initiatives in Mali and in the Basque Country.

FIAN International has initiated a project together with social movements, civil society organizations (CSOs), and academics to monitor the primary barriers to food sovereignty. While other initiatives have built tools for states to monitor achievement of the right to food and nutrition,<sup>9</sup> this new initiative recognizes that food sovereignty is the only way forward. It therefore assesses the conditions necessary for food sovereignty, including the legal and institutional framework for the right to food and nutrition, women's rights, small-scale producers' access to and control over resources, genuine political participation in policy making, and absence of discrimination in enacting food policies and programs—all of these issues overlap and intersect, but have yet to be fully included in the mainstream analysis, and thus into solutions posed to eliminate hunger and malnutrition.

A group of advisors has worked collectively, in consultation with experts who have experience working with social movement and grassroots organizations, to develop indicators for each of these determinants, using various methods and data sets. This initiative seeks to develop a human rights-based food sovereignty counterpoint to the existing monitoring tools; demonstrate the impacts of popular participation, human rights-based accountability and policy coherence in operationalizing human rights obligations; create greater synergy between global and local movements and policy processes; create coherence in human rights advocacy in international reporting; and provide comprehensive analysis and resources for those engaged in work related to the right to food and nutrition. The process, results and ongoing work in this new collective initiative will be closely linked to the Global Network for the Right to Food and Nutrition, working across sectors and constituencies to create and generate a powerful tool to support CSOs.<sup>10</sup> This will enable them to

6 FIAN International is an international human rights organization that has been advocating for the realization of the human right to adequate food and nutrition for 30 years. FIAN consists of national sections and individual members in over 50 countries around the world. For more information, please visit: [www.fian.org](http://www.fian.org). Special thanks to Emily Mattheisen and Sofia Monsalve Suárez (FIAN International) for their support in drafting and reviewing this insight box.

7 For more information on the corporate capture of global fisheries, please see article "Privatization and Corporate Capture of Global Fisheries Policy" in this issue of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*.

8 For more information on the Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles—West Africa, please see article "The Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles in West Africa: Building a Strong and United People" in this issue of the *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch*.

9 For previous initiatives on monitoring the achievement of the right to food and nutrition, please see: Riedel, Eibe, Jan-Michael Arend, and Ana María Suárez Franco. *Indicators-Benchmarks-Scoping-Assessment: Background Paper*. Berlin and Geneva: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2010. Available at: [www.fes-globalization.org/geneva/documents/HumanRights/6July10\\_BackgroundPaper\\_IBSA.pdf](http://www.fes-globalization.org/geneva/documents/HumanRights/6July10_BackgroundPaper_IBSA.pdf).

10 For more information, please visit the new website, which will be launched in the second half of 2016: [www.righttofoodandnutrition.org](http://www.righttofoodandnutrition.org).

articulate their monitoring work in different fora more strategically and to create links between existing monitoring systems including within the CFS, UN human rights bodies such as the CESCR and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the SDGs.

The initiative intends to be a participatory action research project in dialogue with social movements and grassroots organizations. It will remain flexible in its approach, and be tested, adjusted and fine-tuned as we move forward. The success achieved in advocacy is always the result of collective work, so we call on those interested to participate and support this collaborative and ongoing process to join us!<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For more information on how to join, please contact Emily Mattheisen (FIAN International) at [mattheisen@fian.org](mailto:mattheisen@fian.org).