

Defining the Path to Zero Hunger in an Equitable World

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The bold vision for a 21st Century of zero hunger in a healthier and more equitable world has been severely clouded by the gloomy vistas of conflict, COVID, and climate change – all of which have instead worsened the global food crisis. Rather than clarity, there is questioning: Is a world in which all have access to affordable and nutritious food, produced by a food system that is sustainable both for people and planet, and resilient enough to adapt to and thrive in the face of relentless challenges, still attainable, or even still perceptible on the horizon?



During the 2022 World Food Prize Borlaug Dialogues, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs and The Rockefeller Foundation gathered experts and stakeholders from climate, agriculture, food security, and humanitarian backgrounds to bring this vision into focus. Exploring the depth of the global food crisis, while considering the imperative need to respond to both the chronic long-term nutrition insecurity stalking the world and the acute hunger emergencies demanding immediate humanitarian action, the assembled pondered these central questions:

- How can humanitarian relief be linked with longer-term development assistance, so crisis interventions become the first step on the road to more resilient communities, regions, and countries?
- What has been missing from both humanitarian and development conversations, that could help break the cycle of climate and hunger crises plaguing so many vulnerable communities?
- What, if any, core concerns of those impacted by disasters have been unaddressed by the global community?

This paper reflects a summary of their views and offers a framework to begin once again reimagining the future of a zero-hunger world. What emerged from the discussion is a vision of a new world where old hide-bound routines and philosophies are cast aside and new ones move from the realm of tired rhetoric to vigorous reality. It is a world where the word “silos” refers only to structures storing harvested crops and NOT to an ossified practice that segregates both development priorities and actions and the agencies tackling them. Where agriculture and nutrition project timelines break out of short-term straitjackets and stretch to ten years or even longer to properly implement and measure success over time, and where grant funding or governmental budgeting procedures are tailored accordingly. Where food security, climate, water resources, and humanitarian spaces merge to form a shared commons that embraces the complexity of individuals’ and communities’ lived experiences, particularly those often-marginalized people and places most directly affected by food insecurity. And, where these individuals and local communities (including government, educational, social, religious, business leaders and food producers) are listened to rather than dictated to, where their wisdom is prized rather than dismissed and where youth are front and center in setting the future course of the world they will be leading in a few short decades.

Future Focused

The gathering noted that current conditions have brought us to a crossroads. The future is particularly difficult to discern with a seemingly quickened pace of extreme weather events rolling across the world, disruptions of agricultural markets due to the war in Ukraine and other conflicts, and a fragile post-pandemic global economy rattling the global food chain. All of this is complicating our dual imperatives to both nourish the planet and preserve the planet from the environmental threats (to the soils, waters, habitats, biodiversity) from the very agricultural actions necessary to nourish us. An abundance of bleak assessments has raised the stakes and the clamor for attention. The 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, for example, emphasized that climate-related extremes have already slowed agricultural productivity growth in the last 50 years, with these increasing weather extremes likely rendering large areas of crop and livestock land unsuitable for use by 2050, potentially decreasing food production and pushing millions more into food insecurity.¹

Still, the gathering concluded with a message of hope all too often missing from conversations about the future of food. While these stark, evidence-based reminders of what is at stake can weigh us down with inertia – the problems are too great and many, how do we move forward? – it can also spark actions and mobilize resources and lead to embracing disruptive new thinking and solutions. Indeed, the international community – as seen at recent high-level assemblies on food systems, climate, and biodiversity – has increasingly begun to recognize this nexus between food security, climate change, and conflict, and has started to tailor both development and humanitarian assistance efforts accordingly.

Of course, much work remains. The World Food Prize gathering determined that the global community² – all of us – must go several steps further by reimagining the long-term future and analyzing the necessary action to reach it.



Major Obstacles

There is no shortage of obstacles to a better 2050. In the nexus of food security, climate, and humanitarian spaces, three major challenges emerge as particularly significant and ripe for examination and disruptive new alternatives: (1) the tendency to address issues in specific “silos” and domains rather than finding solutions that can cut across many problem areas; (2) a focus on immediate priorities that crowd out our ability to plan for a vision of tomorrow; (3) and the reliance on entrenched power structures that results in top-down decision-making approaches that often overlook local community input. Catalyzing ideas are proposed for addressing these major challenges.

Silos

The first of these challenges are the intricate and long-standing silos and a preoccupation with short-term horizons that have for many years shaped the foreign assistance sector. Silos, in this context, have come to mean groups of stakeholders or institutions that have separated and segregated themselves from each other, and/or operate without sharing decisions, information, processes, or communication. “Breaking down silos” has been a wistful common refrain for decades, particularly between the development and humanitarian spaces; efforts to do so over the years have proved to be elusive and frustrating. Following the 2016 Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released guidelines around humanitarian coherence under its Commitment into Action series, noting that “today’s donor aid architecture often places humanitarian and development teams into two different silos with their own separate tools, funding cycles and decision-making processes.”³

The current challenges besetting food security now make it imperative that the silos finally come down. As the crises converge, so must the strategies to combat them. They demand disruptive thinking that breaks old habits and molds. They challenge organizations to cooperate rather than compete. They encourage embracing the ability of social entrepreneurs to disrupt and adapt.

While this barrier is well-recognized, the problem has clearly persisted beyond previous and recent attempts to integrate sectors and stakeholders, with a 2022 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, for example, noting that significant further coordination is needed to

implement the Global Food Security Strategy.⁴ These silos have always stood in defiance of common sense and the real daily experiences of all those who are the intended beneficiaries of development work. Everything happens all at once in their lives (and in ALL of our lives!) – there is no segregating nutrition from agriculture from health from Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) from infrastructure from governance. Failure in any one of these sectors undermines them all. Conversely, success in any one sector often depends on success in all. This is the bedrock philosophy of the First 1,000 Days movement, which offers an example of embracing the interconnectedness of nutrition, sanitation and hygiene, health care, and community education to improve maternal and child health and ensures the right food at a critical time for child development. Coordination and cooperation have always been the only way forward. Many more novel approaches to dismantling silos and integrating sectors are necessary.

Equally debilitating as “siloeing” has been the prevalence of short-term initiatives that address specific problems for a finite time period. Rarely do these projects coordinate with each other, often housed across multiple bureaus, agencies, programs, and initiatives, without an eye on the larger picture. Rarer still is the project that follows outcomes over time, years or even decades, to judge the success and long-term value. Agriculture, nutrition, and climate change adaptation initiatives, for instance, out of necessity unfold over long periods of time, rendering valuable lessons along the way. Thousands of projects operating independently, for a few years each, are unlikely to change systems or the future in a sustained manner.

Removing three- to five-year limits, projects can become more iterative, absorb feedback, and adjust to meet community needs over a longer period. This could lead to much-needed bureaucratic and financial nimbleness to quickly respond to complex problems. A pipe dream perhaps. But it is important to provide affected communities and policy and program experts with the time and space to work across sectors and to continuously engage in discussions and decision-making. For each barrier examined, this paper offers initial ideas of tools to reach this alternative future. While far from comprehensive, this list synthesizes relevant discussion points, encouraging much further conversation and action, particularly from those most affected by food insecurity, conflict, and the climate crisis.

Catalyzing ideas:

- 1. Integrate development, humanitarian, and climate spaces with community:** Development, humanitarian, and climate issues do not exist apart from each other nor from other intersecting themes such as gender, social protections, political will, or discrimination. Yet these spaces within foreign assistance all possess their own stakeholders, funding, and goals that often inhibit true systems change and resilience. While incrementally “breaking down silos” has somewhat improved coordination between spaces, a more disruptive dismantling is needed. Much can be learned from and gained by investments in grassroots efforts that will build communal resilience to climate shocks and hunger crises, including farmer cooperatives, water users associations, and self-help groups.
- 2. Change aid infrastructure:** US government grants, most often through United States Agency for International Development (USAID), typically function in three- to five-year cycles.¹⁰ This can result in many short-term initiatives operating in a specific developmental silo without sufficient coordination to create sustainable, long-term change. Instead, aid infrastructure can break loose of the inelastic silos and project timeframes to better meet current and future challenges. This necessitates much more significant and concrete discussion, with a dose of courage to try something new; from considering at minimum 10-year plans to entirely restructuring aid as a bottom-up endeavor, stakeholders can think big about what comes next. This should include perspectives and solutions from community-based organizations, NGOs, INGOs, and the private sector.

3. **Be courageous to try something new:** Both the complexity of the challenges facing us, as well as the current system designed to address these challenges, deter deviation from the status quo. Mustering the courage to meet this complexity directly and embrace disruption of a system that often serves those in power will not be easy but will be necessary for true transformation. For instance, a new series of Grand Challenges-like initiatives could be launched to spark and reward the necessary innovations and disruptive actions.
4. **Demand honest reflection & engagement of political will:** Perhaps most challenging for stakeholders, particularly government entities, is closely reflecting upon their own role in perpetuating global problems, potentially to preserve an institution's influence in the foreign aid system. For instance, many large international NGOs have begun to reckon with the high overhead costs concentrated in the Global North that prevent more local expertise, responsibility, and decision-making, yielding shifts in resources and staffing.¹¹ Political will to do the same on a governmental level is crucial. Significant evidence exists to support what interventions or investments work in many cases – agricultural research and development, as an example – but often political complexities interfere with the ability to execute what evidence shows these challenges demand.
5. **Cede power:** As examined in barrier number three (further in this paper), shifting from top-down dictation of priorities to a community-driven, bottom-up approach can naturally decrease silos. This approach completely inverts current foreign assistance, shaking loose entrenched silo structures in favor of assistance directed by needs of affected women and men. Efforts to engage youth, those who will inherit this world and face intensified versions of our current challenges, are particularly critical.

Myopic Priorities

Intense focus on urgent, immediate priorities, also inhibits a healthier and more equitable 2050. With so many simultaneous crises occurring right now, the foreign assistance space is too often trapped in a cycle of madly mobilizing support for these crises, rather than preventing them in the first place. The silos between humanitarian and development spaces only amplify this cycle. This is not to suggest that spending for humanitarian crises should decrease, or that those in urgent crisis should not have the resources they need; instead, foreign assistance stakeholders



should reexamine the divide between humanitarian and development assistance and think more comprehensively about what kinds of assistance can prevent humanitarian disasters. Funding is also not the only resource at play – media often highlights the most striking and immediate catastrophes rather than ongoing challenges faced by communities worldwide. This can further perpetuate a cycle of prioritizing urgency ahead of prevention.

As extreme weather-related disasters have increased fivefold in recent decades, it is more evident than ever that incorporating climate resilience is essential to effective foreign assistance.⁵ By working more closely with climate experts, foreign assistance can benefit from lessons learned in the climate space regarding the balance between immediate need and long-term resilience. Initiatives such as the President's Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience (PREPARE), the Biden Administration's whole-of-government plan to address the climate crisis within foreign policy focusing particularly on vulnerable communities, demonstrate efforts to do this.⁶ Execution will be key, and new and disruptive ideas are still vital to transforming our current foreign assistance system to reach the envisioned future.

Alternatively, consider a world in which we gradually shift resources from crisis response to long-term resilience. Although a completely crisis-free world is unattainable, sustained investments that match community needs and vision – in food security, health, and environmental well-being – can prevent some need for large and frantic humanitarian infusions. Because of investment in long-term resilience, local communities are equipped to meet many needs, decreasing the necessity of foreign assistance. Journalists and other trusted sources bring public attention to urgent crises and persistent challenges facing communities while highlighting progress in overcoming them. Foreign assistance stakeholders work in tandem with those in the climate space, integrating lessons in resilience.

Catalyzing ideas:

- 1. Get the word out:** Public consciousness and support can be difficult to focus and mobilize among the clamor of numerous urgent crises occurring simultaneously. Foreign assistance stakeholders can employ greater partnership with journalists and trusted media sources to bring public attention to ongoing challenges as well – whether food insecurity, conflict, disaster aftermath or more – particularly by telling compelling human-driven narrative stories of those affected. Even catastrophes the public perceives as isolated events need continual support and attention to enable those affected to recover and become resilient to future threats. It is essential that scientists, researchers, development practitioners, and humanitarian workers reach out to journalists (and accommodate their requests) to explain the drivers of hunger and nutrition crises, how one crisis relates to another, and how immediate acute humanitarian needs often emanate and overlap with chronic demands for long-term aid. It is imperative to encourage and enable journalists to stick with stories over the long haul, to show these interrelations between acute and chronic, and how solutions often emerge over time. Above all, adhere to the old journalism maxims: Don't just TELL stories, SHOW stories; and behind every data point, there is a person, an emotion, a voice.
- 2. Articulate what we want:** This paper begins to offer ideas, but global discussion with stakeholders, particularly affected and marginalized communities, is essential to understand this vision in a way that can be executed. Examining existing visions, such as the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), can also lend clarity. The SDGs constitute a vision and agenda for 2030 and were built through "decades of work by countries and the UN."¹² Reflection is needed to understand why the global community is off-track to meet so many of the SDGs – why this vision might not be working, and what a new one requires. A long-term vision cannot only be determined by political entities but should include on-the-ground perspectives from those facing the greatest challenges with the fewest resources. How can actions be fashioned that

solve acute problems while also leading to sustainable long-term solutions? For example, the World Food Programme and other organizations have launched initiatives that provide food aid to support struggling smallholder farmers while they transform their land (terracing fields, managing water) to create resilience in the face of looming climate and environmental threats.

3. **Pledge to prevent:** In FY2019, 20 percent of U.S. foreign aid was spent on humanitarian assistance, and even then it did not meet the great humanitarian need.¹³ Addressing immediate need alone, however, is insufficient; to increase future adaptability to threats, policymakers can consider slowly shifting resources from crisis response to long-term resilience and closely examine how investment in long-term resilience decreases need for crisis response. Perhaps this involves setting a moonshot goal, for example, to decrease the need for humanitarian assistance to 10 percent, so that by 2050, 90 percent of foreign assistance is invested in crisis prevention and cultivating community strength. Policymakers can experiment with fresh, new ideas to stop simply putting out fires and instead make our environment less flammable. Data and data modeling could help identify places most vulnerable to extreme shocks and assist in prioritizing resilience investments, which would then instead create a targeted approach rather than a broad-based approach that treats all communities as equally vulnerable.
4. **Acknowledge the ripple effects:** Most foreign assistance stakeholders do not need to be reminded that investments in food security have far-reaching impacts beyond reducing hunger. Exploring a big picture view of foreign assistance also involves acknowledging the many benefits across society gained from investing in foreign assistance including economic growth, conflict prevention, increased national security, and new trade markets. These positive ripple effects are critical to foster understanding by the general public and policymakers. It is also vital to point out the negative ripple effects that can emanate from an absence of investments and foreign assistance. We have seen how there is no longer an “over there” when crises hit. No borders could contain COVID-19. Similarly, the cumulative global toll of a malnourished child extends beyond the costs of meals, as childhood stunting and wasting translates into higher health care expenses, labor productivity losses, and squandered opportunity costs from a life sentence of underachievement.
5. **Invest in force multipliers:** New approaches to a reimagined future also include scaling existing investments supported by evidence. Given time, many of these evidence-backed investments, including agricultural research and development, nutrition, and women farmers and entrepreneurs, can exhibit steep gains that positively affect multiple issue areas. Agricultural research and development, for instance, show returns of \$10 for every \$1 invested.¹⁴ Nutrition is a force multiplier across lifetimes, helping children reach their full potential and benefiting all of us. Investments in women farmers and entrepreneurs boost household and community food security and health. Because of longer timelines needed to demonstrate returns, however, these solutions are often under resourced. Policymakers can instead commit to scaling evidence-backed solutions, with an eye toward the long-term future. Also, national and local governments can craft policies that create conditions for other actors, such as the private sector and community-based organizations, to be equally transformative players.

Top-Down Decision-Making

Policies and programs are often determined by priorities decided by top-level decision-makers without sufficient relation to or lived experience with the problem at hand. The solutions do not always match community needs and in the end do not produce the intended results. Reorienting foreign assistance to address community needs, rather than donor priorities, is already gaining momentum and offers a source of optimism for moving forward with new strategies. The 2016 Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul resulted in



commitments towards localization in its Grand Bargain, in which donor governments and humanitarian organizations pledged to get more assistance toward local actors, as well as improve aid effectiveness.⁷ The U.S. government created the Millennium Challenge Corporation to form partnerships with national governments to identify priorities and implement programs for achieving sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction. The Feed the Future initiative works with partner countries to end hunger and malnutrition and build food security through agricultural development. USAID has also taken more pointed action. It has invested in a new local capacity development initiative, committing to provide at least 25 percent of program funds directly to local partners by the end of FY2025.⁸ At the same time, more civil society actors are analyzing and calling attention to the impediments confronting the push for locally led development.⁹

The goal is to make routine the practice in which community feedback on foreign assistance efforts is not only integrated in every possible way, but communities themselves decide what priorities, policies, and programs align with their long-term vision. Funding for foreign assistance is spent as effectively as possible, because efforts align with community needs.

Catalyzing ideas:

- 1. Renewed commitments and concrete plans:** The last decade in particular has brought about changes, at least in rhetoric, that offer hope. Executing these changes can prove difficult, as the current power dynamic prioritizing donors over recipients is deeply entrenched. Reaffirming commitment to the Grand Bargain, or a similar vision, could provide a place to start – however, to avoid further silos, whole-of-government foreign assistance efforts (not just the humanitarian space) will need to commit to transformation. This wider vision should incorporate voices of local communities from the beginning in developing detailed action plans for changes that can take root at the local levels.
- 2. Action and participatory research and product design:** Agricultural research and development is a huge force multiplier for food security. New focus on two forms of research – action research and participatory research – introduces additional opportunities to center local communities as much as possible. Action research is particularly

prominent in the climate and natural resource management space, with the Adaptation Research Alliance defining it as driven by needs of users, with an agenda set by open and inclusive processes that encourages the uptake of knowledge and solutions.¹⁵ Similarly, participatory research ensures that researchers and community stakeholders “form equitable partnerships to tackle issues related to community health improvement and knowledge production.”¹⁶ As digital solutions are utilized further, participatory product design can also engage community stakeholders in the decision-making process. All can help propel deep-rooted engagement with and decision-making by affected communities.

- 3. Less restrictive funding:** Together with short funding cycles, restrictions on foreign assistance spending often limit the ability of community-based organizations to either compete for or manage these funds. Funding restrictions can also inhibit the ability to respond to changing community context or needs over time. Although difficult to imagine within current foreign assistance infrastructure, slackening requirements may allow greater community input, program adaptation, and ultimately increased aid effectiveness.
- 4. Recognize overlap between barriers:** Many of the ideas already listed as tools to reach an alternative future center locally led decision-making. Shifting perspectives of affected communities to the core of *all* foreign assistance goals and efforts is perhaps the most significant move towards a new vision, as it counters all three barriers examined here, as well as many more.
- 5. Listen:** To listen is the simplest of all imperatives, but perhaps the most overlooked or ignored. Listen to the people most impacted, as they have great wisdom to share about their lives and the appropriate use of assistance in their communities. Online feedback and use of other types of technology can facilitate listening to more impacted people.

Looking Forward

Of course, no paper can encompass all the barriers we face in creating a healthier, more equitable future for both people and the planet. Instead, this paper aims to tackle some of the greatest obstacles facing the nexus of food security, climate, and humanitarian spaces and ultimately voice hope for a better future. As evident throughout examination of these three barriers, overcoming one will often involve working to overcome all. At the core of disruptive thinking, new solutions and optimism for the future is the expertise of communities facing challenges of food insecurity, extreme weather, water scarcity, and conflict. Political entities should consider sharing power and decision-making to those on the frontline of challenges that will ultimately affect us all. And while these barriers can seem daunting, the passion, ingenuity, and creativity of affected communities, policy and program experts, and public and private institutions harbors significant room for hope.

What's next? First, those working in the foreign policy space can embrace disruption, include and elevate marginalized voices, and shift power to those on the frontlines of humanitarian, climate, and food security challenges. Powerful institutions including donor governments, the private sector, and the philanthropic sector can reflect upon their own roles in perpetuating these challenges – but also, how they can be part of the solution. Multilateral forums can emphasize funding community decision-making and participating political entities can further initial pledges made at previous forums with concrete actions and commitments to which they are accountable. Journalists and others portraying issues of food security, climate change, and humanitarian crises can raise the clamor on the challenges and grim realities of acute and chronic hunger while also highlighting areas of progress and innovation that hold hope for the future. These areas of society coming together can create a new vision for moving forward, offering optimism for a reimagined 2050 where hunger is nearly non-existent, and our food system prioritizes the health of both people and planet.

Endnotes

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Endorsements

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