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Perspectives

Tackling Hunger as a Sustainable Development Goal

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG 2: Zero Hunger) targets the complete eradication of hunger, the elimination of all forms of malnutrition, and the establishment of climate-resilient, sustainable agricultural infrastructure by the year 2030. However, empirical assessments indicate that the global community is severely off-track. Drawing upon empirical reports and scholarly literature, this article provides a systemic, macro-micro critical analysis of the structural impediments to SDG 2. Overlapping systemic disruptions—such as intensifying climate volatility, protracted geopolitical conflicts, and macroeconomic instability—have transformed global undernourishment from a fading historical artifact into an escalating crisis. This article analyzes the multidimensional architecture of modern food insecurity across four fundamental dimensions: physical availability, economic and physical accessibility, nutritional utilization, and systemic temporal stability. It demonstrates that conventional, reductionist approaches emphasizing caloric production expansion are fundamentally insufficient. Instead, they risk aggravating environmental degradation and accelerating the dual burden of malnutrition.

KEYWORDS: Hunger, Poverty, Malnutrition, Food Security, Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

When the United Nations member states codified the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG 2) was framed as a fundamental pillar of human dignity and collective progress. Its targets—specifically Target 2.1 (universal access to safe, sufficient, and nutritious food) and Target 2.2 (the eradication of all forms of malnutrition)—were recognized not merely as isolated humanitarian goals, but as structural prerequisites for the realization of the entire SDG matrix (Atukunda et al., 2021). The elimination of food insecurity serves as the baseline upon which poverty alleviation (SDG 1), public health optimization (SDG 3), high-quality educational access (SDG 4), and gender equity (SDG 5) are built. Yet, as the global community moves past the mid-point of the SDG implementation timeline, empirical indicators reveal a profound and systematic regression. The optimistic trajectories of the early 21st century have collapsed. Progress has stalled or actively reversed under the weight of overlapping global crises.

The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) documentation highlights the severe scale of this regression. Approximately 673 million individuals globally remain undernourished, representing roughly 8.2% of the human population—a figure that mirrors global hunger metrics from nearly two decades prior (Kong-Lozano, 2026). The structural disruptions initiated by the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with intensifying climate abnormalities and geopolitical fragmentation, have institutionalized a state of chronic food insecurity. This crisis currently affects approximately 2.33 billion people moderately or severely worldwide (Kong-Lozano, 2026). This systemic failure stems from a fundamental conceptual flaw: the global agrifood architecture has long operated under a reductionist model that equates food security with raw caloric production maximization (Kong-Lozano, 2026; Valin, 2021). By prioritizing industrial monoculture expansion, intensive synthetic chemical application, and highly financialized global supply chains, the modern food paradigm has compromised long-term ecological stability to achieve short-term yield efficiencies.

Consequently, the agricultural sector has emerged as a primary driver of anthropocentric planetary boundary crossings, contributing significantly to anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, global biodiversity loss, and widespread freshwater depletion (Valin, 2021). This structural contradiction creates an escalating feedback loop: the exact methods deployed to extract short-term caloric surpluses are degrading the foundational biosphere components required to sustain future agricultural yields.

DECONSTRUCTING THE FOUR PILLARS OF FOOD SECURITY

To fully comprehend the structural challenges facing SDG 2, we must move beyond simplistic metrics of aggregate food volume. Instead, food security must be evaluated through the four analytical dimensions established by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO): availability, accessibility, utilization, and stability (Balan, 2026).

Table 1: Pillars of Food Security

Pillar of Food Security	Core Analytical focus	Primary Structural Threats
Availability	Physical volume and supply of agricultural commodities via production and net trade.	Topsoil degradation, climate-induced yield variances, aquifer depletion, and monocultural vulnerability.
Accessibility	Economic purchasing power and physical infrastructure required to acquire nutritious food.	Real-wage stagnation, international food price shocks, supply chain blockades, and hyper-financialized futures markets.
Utilization	Nutritional quality, dietary diversity, metabolic absorption, and biological safety.	Micronutrient deficiencies ("hidden hunger"), toxic pesticide exposure, and the dual burden of stunting paired with obesity.
Stability	Temporal continuity of the prior three pillars across seasons, macro-shocks, and cyclical disruptions.	Unpredictable extreme weather events, geopolitical conflict escalation, and systemic macroeconomic vulnerabilities.

The proverbial pillars of food security are frequently dented by the structural architecture of global trade governance under contemporary neoliberal frameworks has institutionalized deep asymmetries that undermine the agricultural self-sufficiency of developing nations. For decades, international financial institutions urged developing countries to reform their domestic agricultural sectors. These programs encouraged a shift away from traditional subsistence farming geared toward local consumption, and toward large-scale, export-oriented cash crop production designed for the global market (Mollier, 2017).

This reorientation exposed low-income nations to severe macro-financial vulnerabilities:

- **Currency Depreciation & Debt:** When a developing country's currency depreciates against the US dollar, its domestic cost to import foreign food staples escalates instantly, regardless of actual global supply volumes (Pavlova, 2026).
- **Subsidy Distortions:** Wealthy nations frequently provide heavy domestic subsidies to their corporate agricultural sectors, enabling them to export surplus grain at prices below the actual cost of production (Modise, 2026). This artificial dumping depresses local market prices in developing nations, undercutting local smallholder farmers and driving them out of business.
- **Infrastructure Deficits:** The long-term neglect of domestic food storage, processing, and transportation infrastructure leaves local agrifood systems deeply vulnerable to international market volatility. This structural imbalance leaves many nations unable to withstand global economic shocks without experiencing immediate, severe spikes in food insecurity.

GENDER, INEQUALITY, AND FOOD SECURITY

The impacts of global hunger are distributed highly unequally across demographic lines. Food insecurity is deeply mediated by structural inequalities, with gender operating as a primary vector of systemic vulnerability (Umezulike, 2026). Across many rural economies in the Global South, women represent a large share of the agricultural labor force. They are primarily responsible for plantin g, weeding, processing, and domestic food preparation. Yet, due to patriarchal legal structures and discriminatory institutional frameworks, rural women experience systemic marginalization within global food governance networks (Umezulike, 2026). A core driver of this gendered vulnerability is the systemic denial of secure land tenure rights. In many customary legal systems, women are prohibited from owning, inheriting, or independently leasing agricultural land (Umezulike, 2026).

Without formal land titles, female smallholders are systematically excluded from formal credit markets, as they lack the physical collateral required by commercial banking institutions. This lack of capital prevents women from purchasing high-quality inputs, modern irrigation tools, and climate-smart agricultural technologies. Consequently, agricultural fields managed by women consistently exhibit lower yields than those managed by men, a direct outcome of systemic under-investment rather than differences in agricultural capability. Furthermore, when climate-driven droughts or economic shocks compress household food supplies, intra-

household food distribution systems routinely favor male members. This pattern forces women and girls to reduce their caloric and nutritional intake first and most severely (Umezulike, 2026). Additionally, state climate adaptation strategies are frequently designed without accounting for gender dynamics, ignoring the distinct structural realities of informal female labor networks. To achieve SDG 2, policy frameworks must dismantle these institutional blind spots. Ensuring universal access to food requires a concerted effort to guarantee secure land titles for women, establish gender-customized micro-credit channels, and incorporate female perspectives into formal climate resilience and agricultural governance policies (Umezulike, 2026).

STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS AND STRUCTURAL SOLUTIONS

Resolving the global food crisis and steering the international community back toward the targets of SDG 2 requires moving past marginal adjustments to the industrial agricultural model. Instead, it demands a comprehensive, coordinated structural transformation of global agrifood architecture.

Transitioning toward Agroecological Production Systems

To mitigate the severe environmental degradation caused by industrial farming, global production models must transition away from chemical-intensive monocultures and toward agroecological systems (Hiywotu, 2025). Agroecology applies ecological principles to agricultural design, optimizing natural biological interactions to eliminate reliance on synthetic chemical inputs while enhancing total system resilience.

- **Polyculture Crop Diversification:** Replacing vast fields of single-crop varieties with diverse polyculture planting systems breaks pest reproductive cycles naturally, minimizing the need for synthetic chemical pesticides. Integrating nitrogen-fixing leguminous cover crops into standard seasonal rotations restores soil fertility naturally, lowering dependency on synthetic fertilizers.
- **Conservation Tillage Practices:** Shifting to zero-till or low-till farming methods preserves the structural matrix of organic topsoil, preventing wind and water erosion while increasing the soil's capacity to store carbon.
- **Agroforestry Integration:** Planting targeted multi-tiered tree and shrub networks alongside standard crops provides structural shade, lowers soil temperature, and reduces evaporation losses. The deep root structures of agroforestry systems also

capture and recycle nutrients from deep soil layers while strengthening resilience against intense wind and rain events (Hiywotu, 2025).

Reforming Supply Chain Architectures and Reducing Food Waste

The current hyper-centralized structure of global food supply chains introduces severe distribution vulnerabilities while generating immense structural inefficiencies. Currently, roughly one-third of all food produced for human consumption is lost or wasted across the global supply chain, representing an ethical failure and an immense waste of natural resources (Balan, 2026). Addressing this systemic loss requires targeted investments tailored to the specific infrastructure deficits of different regions. In developing economies, food loss occurs primarily during the early post-harvest stage due to a lack of cold-chain storage facilities, inadequate transport networks, and poor processing infrastructure (Hiywotu, 2025). Building networks of solar-powered refrigeration units and modern, pest-proof storage silos within rural communities would enable smallholders to store surpluses safely, preventing early spoilage and avoiding forced sales during harvest price dips.

In developed nations, food waste occurs predominantly at the retail and consumer levels, driven by arbitrary aesthetic marketing standards and consumer discard habits (Balan, 2026). Mitigating this waste requires establishing clear national regulatory penalties for retail food dumping, creating streamlined frameworks for redirecting surplus food to social safety programs, and updating consumer label standards to eliminate confusion over expiration dates. Simultaneously, developing diversified, regional supply networks alongside global distribution channels helps insulate domestic food markets from international geopolitical and financial shocks (Pavlova, 2026).

Institutionalizing Rights-Based Food Governance and Social Safety Nets

Because market distribution systems allocate resources based on purchasing power rather than human need, achieving SDG 2 requires establishing non-market institutional protections that treat access to nutritious food as an inalienable human right (Pavlova, 2026; Umezulike, 2026). Governments must decouple basic nutritional access from fluctuating market dynamics by institutionalizing robust, universally accessible social safety nets.

- **Universal School Feeding Programs:** Providing free, balance-optimized daily meals using locally sourced agricultural items improves childhood nutrition while driving reliable demand for local smallholder farmers (Atukunda et al., 2021).

- **Nutrition-Sensitive Cash Transfers:** Providing targeted cash assistance directly to vulnerable households during economic downturns protects their purchasing power, preventing immediate nutritional deprivation when market prices spike (Pavlova, 2026).
- **Strategic Grain and Food Reserves:** Maintaining publicly managed food reserves allows governments to release staple commodities directly into domestic markets during crises, cooling speculative price spikes and stabilizing local supply chains.

CONCLUSION

The empirical realities of the 2020s demonstrate that the international community cannot achieve Sustainable Development Goal 2 through marginal modifications to the status quo. The escalating impacts of global climate change entrenched geopolitical conflicts, and hyper-financialized market systems have exposed the deep vulnerabilities of our current global agrifood architecture. Continuing with the conventional, production-focused model will not end global hunger; instead, it will accelerate environmental degradation and worsen the global burden of malnutrition. Achieving "Zero Hunger" requires a fundamental systemic transformation. The international community must realign global priorities, transitioning from an extractive, corporate agrifood model to a resilient, equitable framework that treats nutrition as a fundamental public good. This shift requires:

- Transitioning to sustainable, agroecological farming systems that restore the biosphere.
- Dismantling the structural gender inequalities that marginalize female food producers.
- Reforming global trade rules to protect local food sovereignty.
- Establishing non-market social safety nets that insulate human nutrition from speculative financial forces.

The window of opportunity to meet the targets of SDG 2 by 2030 is rapidly closing. The steps outlined in this paper represent more than optimal policy recommendations; they are necessary prerequisites for securing long-term global stability, preserving human capital, and honoring the fundamental right to be free from hunger.

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