FIAN

Analysis

Time for Human Rights-based SOFIN?
A critical look into the 2018 State of Food Insecurity and Nutrition in the World

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The 2018 State of Food Insecurity and Nutrition in the World (SOFIN) was released in September with the news that in 2017 an alarming 821 million persons suffered from undernourishment, an increase from 784 million in 2015, and with a projected increase in 2018. Indicating that with such increases, we are way off track achieving the ambitious goal of ending hunger and malnutrition by 2030, as set out in the SDGs.

The authors of the SOFIN report are quick to point out contributing factors that lead to rising rates of hunger and malnutrition: Conflict and climate change. But they fail to address the root causes or underlying issues or to acknowledge the failure of solutions and public policy that meaningfully address, and include, those persons who are suffering from hunger and malnutrition. **The increase in global hunger is not taking place inside a vacuum.** While global numbers of hunger and malnutrition increase, the world continues to witness regression in human rights commitments across international, regional and national levels, and a failure of governments to fully address issues of accountability. The right to food is the right of people to feed themselves, their families and their communities in dignity, today and in the future. The right to food requires laws and policies that support this and improve peoples' ability to meet their food needs, to grow food and to make a living sustainably.

Data is not enough

Data is an important and powerful tool that can paint a picture of how a community, country, region, or even the global population stands vis-à-vis specific indicators. It can indicate progress, as well as failures in issues related to community and global development. However, numbers cannot tell the full story and cannot be separated from qualitative analysis and the experiences of those who it represents.

Despite the revised methodology of the SOFIN implemented in 2017, and the inclusion of new "qualitative" indicators through the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES)- the SOFIN report continues to largely reduce issues of hunger and malnutrition to nutrient deficiencies and neglects the quality of food (including cultural adequacy), the relation to needs based on livelihoods and labor, or periodic food insecurity caused, for example by food price increases or disaster/emergency. This happens, despite the fact that research is increasingly showing evidence that even short term food deficits can be detrimental to nutritional health. The endless focus on hard data collection skews the reality on the ground rather than assessing the structural causes of food and nutrition insecurity such as inequality, poverty and malnutrition, and fails to capture the priority issues of those most affected and subject to human rights violations.

The FIES data is potentially very interesting – as it is an experienced based food insecurity metric and can go beyond micronutrient- and medical-based assessments. The report indicates that globally, the FIES data has largely supported the numbers found through the Prevalence of Undernourishment Indicator (PoU), which is the indicator that produced the number of 821 million persons facing hunger and malnutrition. However, unlike the PoU, the FIES data potentially reveals more nuances in national food insecurity, as well as behaviors disaggregated by gender, socio-economic status, etc. And while

national information on countries is available, for the second year in a row they are not released in the SOFIN report.

The SOFIN focus only on severe food insecurity portrays global hunger and malnutrition as an issue only of the global south. And while there is indeed a bigger share of hunger and malnutrition in the "global south" – hunger and poverty are issues in the "developed countries" : an estimated 40.0 million people live in food-insecure households, including 250,000 households in which children suffer from very low food security in the USA. An estimated 1/3 of the UK population are skipping meals because they cannot afford to put food on the table, as both countries rely on food banks and charity-based models as a response to food insecurity, rather than meeting their obligations to fulfil the right to food, states force those living in food insecurity to rely on charity to meet their food needs.

And despite the focus on severe food insecurity, it does not fully address **the crisis of famine experienced in 2017- which is the most extreme and violent violation of the right to food. Famines do not emerge over-night or suddenly- they exist in situations of broad based human rights violations and discrimination, as well as impunity.** Some 18 million + persons in Yemen are facing food insecurity, with current reports indicating that aid blockades are putting many communities back on the verge of famine, compounded with outbreaks of cholera due to destroyed water and sanitation facilities. Additionally, the targeted destruction of agricultural infrastructure and rural areas has prevented local and national food production in the country. While powerful governments – namely the US and Saudi Arabia- fueling a war with no end in sight- what is to become of the people in the country- who have no choice but to stay in Yemen, or seek refuge in other conflict-ridden countries such as Somalia or Djibouti? The people of South Sudan, Somalia, and North East Nigeria also faced famine in 2017- and presently, there has been little to know change in the lives and futures of the people who are most impacted.

The Climate Change narrative is too narrow

The 2017 report focused on climate issues as a key contributing factor to increased food insecurity, as "Exposure to more complex, frequent and intense climate extremes is threatening to erode and reverse gains made in ending hunger and malnutrition." But what the report fails to address is what systems are contributing to global climate change versus those that contribute to mitigation and adaptation- and other factors that fundamentally increase food insecurity. While the global industrial food system is a huge a contributor to global green house gas emissions and climate change, it also produces "food" at the cost of biodiversity, degradation of land and water resources, human health and the right to food, and rural livelihoods, among others.

Crop-breeding and adaptive measures which are clustered under "climate smart agriculture" which are presented as successful methodologies of coping with climate change not only potentially challenge the rights of farmers and favor large corporate actors, they are also short term coping mechanisms for structural problems which have emerged from the industrial agriculture and food sectors such as mono-cropping and industrial agricultural, the use of chemicals and pesticides, and industrial large-scale livestock, among others. Technological solutions blind us from answers which challenge the business as usual approach- which is clearly not working, as evidenced by the ever-increasing numbers of hunger.

Research indicates that what is needed is a "fundamentally different model of agriculture based on diversifying farms and farming landscapes, replacing chemical inputs, optimizing biodiversity and stimulating interactions between different species, as part of holistic strategies to build long-term fertility, healthy agro-ecosystems and secure livelihoods, i.e. 'diversified agroecological systems'." In fact, we are seeing more and more that in the face of climate disasters, it is agroecological systems which are the most resilient as they are fundamentally built on working with nature and adapting to

its needs, as well as community solidarity- a seen in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in [Puerto Rico](#) in 2018.

While the report does acknowledge that climate disasters can contribute to social instability, it is also important to acknowledge that climate impacts alone do not create food insecurity. **The current global situation of extreme food insecurity is <u>not</u> the result of a hurricane, a drought, or a flood- it is a result of long-standing structural issues, under-development, and often times various manifestations of discrimination and human rights violations.** These same policies which promote industrial agriculture and food production, and marginalize small scale food producers, are also contributing to the rapid onset of climate change impacts. We are at a moment to step up commitment to real structural changes, that ensure both human rights and environmental health.

Political will and accountability is needed to shift the numbers

Change cannot happen with the willingness to adopt and design policies that seek to address the root causes of hunger and malnutrition, and indeed ensure their implementation. While we have seen in many countries the adoption of right to food laws and policies, most recently with the Government of Nepal, or ongoing processes in countries such as Scotland, Bangladesh, Malawi, and Costa Rica, there is still a huge gap between frameworks and implementation.

According to the SOFIN report, national and local governments can find guidance in the policy outcomes from existing platforms including UNFCC, Agenda 2030/SDGs, ICN2, Sendai Risk Reduction Framework, World Humanitarian Summit, among others- acknowledging the need to bridge these platforms and sectors together. **Yet it fails to address the fundamental role of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and the human rights system.**

The CFS is UN body positioned as the "[foremost inclusive intergovernmental and international political platform on food security and nutrition with the explicit vision to foster the progressive realization of the right to adequate food for all](#)", and has had a significant contribution to [policy guidance](#) on issues related to food security and the right to food with the full and meaningful participation of civil society through a dedicated Civil Society Mechanism (CSM).

While the CFS still has many political challenges to [overcome](#), it is in the best position to assess root causes and develop solutions to hunger and malnutrition, make connections with other policy spaces, including human rights bodies and special procedures, such as the UN Special Rapporteurs on the Right to Food, and ensure that those persons most impacted by food security and malnutrition have a voice in the decisions that most impact them. The CFS also has its own mechanisms for monitoring and accountability, which is flexible to adapt to different national and regional contexts, and is built on a human-rights based framework- ensuring the full and meaningful participation of those most affected by hunger and malnutrition.

3 years into the SDGs and we still have failed to see the added value of this process to the questions of global hunger and the right to food and nutrition more broadly. **In fact- since 2015, global hunger has increased.** Countries undergoing Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes have failed to meaningfully deal with issues related to food security and nutrition in relationship to food and farming systems, or present solutions which reflect a dialogue with those who are most affected. These national processes of review, which in principle should be participatory, are largely seen by civil society across sectors as having failed to capture the reality on the ground, or as a space of meaningful participation. So it is time to rethink how serious we are to challenge and question why hunger is increasing, or if we continue to allow the SDGs to be a tool to further justify business as usual, consolidate private interests, and praise false solutions to global issues.

Solutions must be rights based

We cannot forget that human rights are at the core of the United Nations System and are not something that is left to the treaty bodies in Geneva. And we cannot fear criticism of policies and governments, or to fundamentally questions the current approaches to addressing hunger. **Clearly, they are not working.**

Climate change and conflict, which exacerbate hunger and have impacts falling worst on the poorest and most marginalized people, and they are being caused by blatant disregard of human rights and inequitable access to resources. There is a need to re-examine a food system where food for profit trumps human rights, and global inequality is rising rapidly. The SOFIN is an important contribution to the global discourse on food security, but it fails to create an analysis and recommendations that will lead to decreases in global hunger. **Creating a human-rights based narrative in the SOFIN report, as well as making available all country –based data for severe and moderate food insecurity** would ensure that the structural issues of food insecurity and malnutrition are brought to the fore, as well as critically examine the policies which are generating hunger

→ For more information on analysis and solutions on how to realize the human right to adequate food through policy, see the 2018 report of the Civil Society Mechanism of the Committee on World Security examining the Right to Food Guidelines.