



**SUSTAINABLE FOOD SECURITY  
FOR ALL BY 2020**  
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**SUMMARY NOTE**

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**Title:** Success and Failures in Achieving the Goals of the World Food Summit

At the World Food Summit (WFS) in Rome in 1996, heads of state representing 186 countries affirmed their "common and national commitment to achieving food security for all" and agreed to work toward the achievement of the intermediate goal of "reducing the number of undernourished people to half their present number no later than 2015." Recognizing the multifaceted nature of food insecurity, the WFS 1996 Plan of Action also contained seven commitments, each in a broad action area relevant for reducing the number of undernourished and eventually achieving food security for all.

It has become clear that if present trends continue, the target of halving the number of undernourished people cannot be met. According to FAO's estimates, this number declined in the developing world from about 830 million in 1990–92 (the baseline for the World Food Summit, 1996) to about 790 million by 1995–97, a decline of about 8 million per year. This compares with a decline of about 20 million on average every year that would be needed if the WFS targets are to be met.

Moreover, it is critical to note that the decline in the number of undernourished in the developing world was concentrated in a few large countries: especially China, where the number of undernourished people declined by about 50 million over this period. In the majority of the developing countries in FAO's database the number of undernourished either did not decline or actually increased.

This presentation focuses on the varied experiences of countries in the fight against undernourishment in the hope that common factors can be found to explain success or failure. The change in the proportion of the population undernourished provides a measure of performance in which population growth has been taken into account. Thus, even in the face of a decreasing share, there still may be an increase in the numbers of undernourished if the rate of increase is lower than that of population growth.

FAO data show that 13 countries — Benin, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Chad, China, The Gambia, Ghana, Indonesia, India, Mali, Mauritania, Nepal, and Nigeria — recorded a reduction of undernourishment by one percentage point or more per year between 1980 and 1996, with the largest reduction of 52 percentage points in Ghana. By contrast, 10 countries — Afghanistan, Burundi, Central African Republic, Cuba, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Liberia, Madagascar, Mongolia, Somalia, and Tanzania — saw this proportion rise by more than one percentage point a year.

The best and worst performing countries are found in most of the world's developing regions, including Sub-Saharan Africa, where the proportion of the population undernourished is highest. In fact, eight of the best performers and six of the worst performers are in Sub-Saharan Africa, reflecting, in part, the extreme diversity of agro-ecological and policy environments which condition agricultural growth. Political and socio-economic conditions faced by the successful countries vary considerably, as do the major factors that contribute to the reduction of hunger. But the experiences

of these countries indicate that, if a few fundamental conditions are met, world hunger can be reduced substantially.

At the simplest level, for a given rate of population growth, reducing the proportion of undernourished requires a combination of faster growth in per caput food availability (through production and trade, for example), and improved access to food (through higher incomes and social entitlement programs). Reducing food insecurity in a broader sense also requires improvements in basic health and education to allow better utilization of food. These processes cannot, however, work effectively in the absence of social stability and peace.

The critical importance of agricultural development in reducing undernourishment is confirmed by the divergent experiences of the best and worst performing groups referred to above (the "decreasing" and "increasing" groups, respectively). An important reason for the success of the countries in the "decreasing" group was that they managed to increase per-caput food and agricultural production at fairly high rates, except in some countries where increased imports served to supplement slower domestic supply growth in making food available. External assistance to agriculture — commitments made by multilateral and bilateral donor agencies — per agricultural worker decreased in both groups, but the decline was larger in the "increasing" group. Agricultural production and productivity can be raised through public investment in agricultural technologies and infrastructure, as the experiences of Benin, China, Indonesia, and India demonstrate. The more recent experiences of Nigeria and Ghana, with improved varieties of cassava, is evidence of the potential returns to investment in agricultural research.

Access to food can be increased by strong pro-poor economic growth. This was true for the "decreasing" countries, where real GDP growth was positive for all of them, albeit with substantial variations. Access to food can also be improved by increasing the human capital of the poor, especially their education and health, and by improving the status of women. A recent study by IFPRI underscores the importance of variables reflecting the status of women in society and levels of basic health in improving access to food. This study examined the relationship between a variety of factors and reductions in underweight in children in 63 developing countries between 1970 and 1995. It indicated that the statistical explanation of reductions in underweight centered on variables reflecting, in order of importance, the status of women in society, per-caput food production and health environment factors.

It is also necessary to ensure that the poor and vulnerable are not deprived of access to food. The provision of safety nets to protect livelihoods and ensure the survival of vulnerable people is a powerful investment towards that goal. Societies create informal safety nets that protect food security, including community support systems such as kinship networks and religious groups as well as other civil society organizations to protect people facing hard times. Nevertheless, public policy measures are also necessary. Direct public transfers such as emergency food relief, supplementary feeding programs, food-for-work and food rationing schemes, and indirect public transfers such as employment guarantee schemes, publicly backed insurance schemes, pension funds and social welfare programs are examples of forms these schemes may take.

Finally, the restoration of peace and social stability seems to be a fundamental key to success. The experience of Afghanistan, Somalia, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, indicates the high cost of wars and other calamities that cause severe disruptions in access to food among vulnerable groups, especially the very poor. In these countries the number of people suffering from undernutrition and other forms of deprivation has increased very substantially as a result of conflict and political economy breakdowns. It seems clear that it is only after peace and stability are established that other factors assume importance.

*Note: The views expressed in this summary note are those of the author and are not necessarily endorsed by or representative of IFPRI or of the cosponsoring or supporting organizations.*