



TOGETHER
AGAINST HUNGER
RETHINKING THE FIGHT

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO END HUNGER?

PERSPECTIVES ON THE MISSING ELEMENTS THAT MUST
BE ADDRESSED TO ELIMINATE GLOBAL FOOD AND
NUTRITION INSECURITY

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OVERVIEW

Action Against Hunger partnered with Devex in late 2021 to kick off [Together Against Hunger](#) and explore the global development community's thinking on the global rise in hunger and food insecurity. We surveyed more than 860 international NGOs, donors, corporations, private foundations, and UN agencies, supplemented with in-depth interviews. It was the first survey of this scale to collect expert insights on the pandemic's current and potential long-term impacts on hunger globally, along with concrete recommendations for interventions. The resulting report, [Zeroing in on Ending Hunger](#), published in January 2022, flagged that "efforts to eradicate hunger are in danger of being blown off course by a string of crises related to climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic and conflict."

To complement this analysis, Action Against Hunger organized a series of focus group discussions, narrowing in on perspectives that were underrepresented in the original industry survey-based exploration. These additional discussions help to validate, deepen, and expand the Zeroing in on Hunger report findings.

While focus groups validated the key findings of the Zeroing in on Ending Hunger report, participants also found the report stopped short of identifying how to create meaningful change and progress in eradicating hunger. Across 12 focus group discussions with over 60 participants, Action Against Hunger identified five emergent themes that we hope will facilitate a re-think of our collective efforts to eradicate hunger:

1. Understanding and addressing the sense of feeling overwhelmed and hopeless when it comes to eradicating hunger;
2. Actively prioritizing approaches that target the inequities that undermine progress;
3. Realizing that transformation is required – small adjustments will not create the change we seek;
4. Incentivizing productive and sustainable ways to overcome key gaps in accountability; and,
5. Moving beyond our existing paradigm of nutritional sufficiency to address longer-term needs and outcomes.

This report dives into each of these themes – synthesizing the inputs across focus group participants and highlighting areas of both agreement and disagreement on the way forward.

METHODOLOGY

To inform this synthesis report, Action Against Hunger conducted a series of focus and key informant group discussions from March through May 2022. Utilizing a discussion guide, 12 focus group discussions and 5 key informant interviews were conducted, consisting of a total 64 participants. Participants were selected for their ability to provide a unique and underrepresented perspective from that offered in the November 2021 Devex survey.

Before each discussion, each participant was provided information on [Together Against Hunger](#) and the "[Zeroing in on Ending Hunger](#)" report (as optional pre-reading), as well as asked to complete an informed consent form. Each focus group and/or key informant interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, and was facilitated by a moderator and notetaker, both of which were Action Against Hunger network staff members, and who took notes and recorded the discussion, with the permission of the participants. Key findings from these discussions focus on either (a) consistent themes identified across responses that deepen, contextualize, complicate, or add critical nuance to those themes identified in the Zeroing in on Ending Hunger report or (b) emergent themes that may have been underrepresented or missed in that report given the difference in audience.

KEY FINDINGS

1. OVERWHELM AND HOPELESSNESS

Hunger's drivers are so complex and interconnected that we struggle to meaningfully understand and address them.

- Conflict, climate, economic shocks, poverty, inequality, and Covid-19 were all highlighted across focus groups as the drivers of hunger. While there was generally uniform consensus around these primary drivers, each individual driver was itself considered to be complex. Participants noted a tendency to keep consideration of these drivers at a top-line, higher-level, rather than digging into their granularity especially when considering their potential relationship to hunger as an outcome. As one respondent explained, "It's not often deep enough to really understand what the drivers of the drivers are" because we're "not asking the right questions." Corruption, health, food waste and urbanization were identified as important elements either missing or without nuance regarding their influence on hunger's drivers.
- Respondents also noted that each of these driver remained conceptually dislocated from hunger in our narrative and practical approach, despite that we understand and even often refer to them as inherently interconnected. Yet, at the same time, these drivers were also referred to as nebulous "outside factors" – beyond the control or influence of those working on hunger-related issues. The result was an overriding sense that, to make any sustainable gains in eradicating hunger, each of these drivers must be addressed first, a priori. A drivers-first approach seemed to create overwhelm and hopelessness from the compounded intractability across drivers.
- Likely as a result, respondents found that the humanitarian and development industry addressed what is widely recognized as multi-dimensional crisis on a sectoral or driver-specific basis, with solutions that often do not reflect the interconnected nature of the problem. Without clear directionality in terms of required interconnected actions and expected outcomes, the community then gets hung up on advocating for either: (a) continual increases funding per driver or (b) refined funding streams, even though billions of dollars are invested both directly and indirectly, year after year in the fight against hunger.
- Finally, participants noted that even though inequity is seen as a driver of hunger, discussion of all drivers cannot be removed from discussions of power. Yet power seems to be a critical element lacking in our conceptualization within and across drivers vis-à-vis hunger. As one individual exclaimed, "The system is designed to systemically oppress, create and exacerbate disparities and we can't really get to the root of hunger until we talk about that...and that's a much harder conversation to have."

"THERE'S SO MANY DIFFERENT WAYS THAT YOU CAN TRY TO TARGET THIS ISSUE. BUT YOU'D HAVE TO TARGET ALL OF THEM, AND PEOPLE ARE NOT REALLY FOCUSING ON THAT. PEOPLE ARE SILOED IN DOING A LOT OF THEIR WORK."

"HISTORICALLY, HUNGER RELIEF PROGRAMS HAVE BEEN FOCUSING ON HUNGER AS THOUGH IT IS THE PROBLEM RATHER THAN THE SYMPTOM OF A GREATER SOCIETAL FAILING TO PROVIDE PEOPLE WHAT THEY NEED NOT TO BE HUNGRY."

2. POWER INEQUITIES

Everyone must re-assess and confront their potential role not only eradicating but also perpetuating hunger.

- As one exasperated participant exclaimed, we have to re-think “who is really benefitting and who are we really serving” and another added, “we haven’t spent enough time diving into power dynamics and why those fundamental root causes of both the acute needs and also of building resilience have not been addressed.”

- Across many discussions, focus group participants identified a lack of true consideration of the structural causes of hunger that are acknowledged to limit sustainable gains in eradicating hunger. This consistent de-prioritization of power dynamics bred a sense of cynicism and compounded the hopelessness for meaningful change without a more transformative approach to the problem.

“HOW MANY ORGANIZATIONS WILL STICK WITH EMERGENCY RELIEF RATHER THAN PIVOT BACK TO LONG-TERM SYSTEMIC PROBLEM SOLVING AND WHAT IS THAT GOING TO DO FOR RESILIENCY? WE ARE NOT GOING TO HAVE THE SAME LEVEL OF PREVENTATIVE RESILIENCE. WE MAY HAVE DISASTER RELIEF RESILIENCE, BUT WE SHOULDN'T BE TREATING THE DISASTER”

- A leading concern among participants was the role of the non-profit sector in both intentionally and unintentionally perpetuating the “hunger industrial complex.” Respondents noted that humanitarian and development organizations (more specifically those large INGOs from the global north) do not own their part in the “almost purposeful replication of centuries long violence.” They noted that these organizations lack the ability and willingness to truly confront our own privilege (economic, racial, political power) and how it is both perpetuated and promoted within the “business” model of the INGOs.
- These power dynamics are therefore seen to intentionally maintain the status quo, resulting in:
 - The devaluation of local expertise paired with a hyper-focus on northern “technical” or technocratic solutions. This shift serves as a means of distraction – away from addressing social or political dimensions that undermined progress whilst promoting the continued “expertise” of those in power and justifying their continued financial resourcing. As one individual emphasized, “There are many low-tech solutions that can make a major difference” and another exclaimed, “we don’t need to talk about high-level technological solutions.”
 - A pattern in which cross-organization coordination and collaboration are “beaten by competition.” Spurred on by the INGO as business model logic, focus group discussants noted a low incentive to work together, since organizational logic was seen to undermine both connecting and working with other actors and efforts.
 - The elevation of those “solutions” that are beneficial for the business model or country government, such that the approaches prioritized are aligned with those that will build and sustain power, rather than those oriented towards generating outcomes aligned with the eradication of hunger. As one respondent noted, “what gets prioritized is what is beneficial for the West.”
 - An over-emphasis on achieving outputs rather than outcomes and counting of beneficiaries reached rather than sustainable reductions achieved in burden of hunger, which is not new to the sector writ-large but magnified during the Covid-19 pandemic. As one respondent said, “everybody in the pandemic was excited about serving more people...which is a great metric of ‘we did a lot of work’ but it’s a terrible metric of what we are doing as a society that we would need to have non-profits grow”. They added, “Non-profits should be able to shrink over time, but when you export externalities of inequalities and just push it into the charitable space...that’s what you get.”

- The dilution of resources as they “trickle down”, either from national government governments to local authorities (through corruption) or from INGOs to local civil society organizations (through the localization agenda). Compounding this trickle down of financial resources were the increasing constraints placed on decision-making for how the funds could and should be used, leading to a continual loss of agency to design locally led and relevant solutions through the progressive trickle down.

“UGANDA HAS TRIED TO DO WHAT THE WORLD WANTS, AND, IN THE PROCESS, WE HAVE LOST A LOT OF OUR CULTURE AND OUR CONFIDENCE.”

- While most groups emphasized the importance advancing localization for eradicating hunger, many noted that the current mix of bigger intermediaries and “smaller actors doing the real work on the ground” is the wrong division of labor, but that organizational and financial interests disincentivize the true transfer of power to others. As a result, while the on-going discourse around localization promoted by those in power supports the notion that these organizations are truly invested in change, a “blatant action gap” has emerged as they fail to actively promote that transformational change in practice. Participants emphasized that localization must allow local partners to “manage to take back their destiny in hand.”
- Finally, some respondents emphasized that collectively as a global society, we must re-think and shift “the way we think of food security and who it really affects” as well as those who are best positioned to provide assistance in times of need. Participants echoed a continuing stigma associated with those who identify as food and/or nutritionally insecure and the sense of shame experienced as they access resources to overcome it, noting that at-times this shame limits the timeliness of their access to assistance to the point where the need is dire and consequences already difficult to overcome.

3. UNRELENTING INERTIA

The humanitarian and development assistance systems are bound by their own inertia. Small tweaks around the borders will be insufficient to achieve ZeroHunger.

- Overwhelmingly, participants agreed that the limitations of our current approach are clear and compelling. In addition to the consensus observed on the main drivers of hunger, there was equally strong consensus that our existing approaches are broken and reactive – both in terms of our response addressing hunger directly as well its root causes. As one respondent exclaimed, “I think we have always reacted...to the impacts of climate change, or reacted to a conflict, or a pandemic...but I think we need to think a little more strategically about how we can prevent these impacts”. They further expanded, “I think that’s something we aren’t doing. We’re reacting instead of trying to predict and prepare for something in the future” and another added, “we just have to do the best we can...that’s all we can do in the moment.”

“YOUR BOARD WILL HAMMER YOU ABOUT MISSION DRIFT WHEN IT’S A GREAT IDEA THAT’S TANGENTIAL BUT AS SOON AS ITS SOMETHING THAT IS EASY TO SELL AND DEMONSTRATE...ITS STILL MISSION ALIGNED SOMEHOW.”

- Yet, many discussants seemed to question whether the “best we can do” in the moment is really the best we can do overall. Within the existing system, they noted:
 - Intervention happens too late in the trajectory of a crisis, even when there is significant early warning. There must be a better way to not only anticipate, but more proactively respond to emergencies.

- The system is easily overwhelmed by emergent crises, e.g., the recent conflict in Ukraine, that quickly shift and complicate global priorities and resource allocations. Yet, we continue to treat each crisis in isolation, as they arise in real-time, without due collective consideration of possible knock-on effects for other standing emergencies.
- Shortsighted actions continue to be promoted and perpetuated, which prevents real and critical conversations around what would need to shift to achieve more sustainable solutions.
- Preparedness is associated with building resilience, without a true understanding of how to achieve resilience within our systems – at local, regional, and global levels – in practice.
- There is a lack of understanding of how to and incentive to build systems for prevention. As one participant said, “We are moving into a world of more pressures and more crises. If our systems don’t get better at preventing...then we’ll be set up for failure.”
- Finally, it is important to note that the cynicism and sense of hopelessness observed under the first theme in this report was also experienced under this theme as well, as one individual expressed: “It would be hard to implement...we’re talking like revolutionary change, a massive change to how we even live in this world.”

“WHEN IT COMES TO UNPACKING THESE LARGER ISSUES, THERE BECOMES A NEED FOR SOME VALUES CLARIFICATION, REALLY, AND A NEED FOR THE WESTERN COUNTRIES TO REFLECT ON THE REASONS WHY THESE THINGS AREN’T BEING PRIORITIZED”

4. ACCOUNTABILITY GAPS

While progress has been made in fostering accountability among national government partners, key gaps remain, especially in terms of private sector accountability.

- One of the focus groups’ questions that participants found the most challenging was “where does accountability for ending hunger lie now, where should it lie, and how can it be strengthened?” Overall, respondents noted a good degree of attention to and success with national government accountability mechanisms. They noted that high-level government stakeholders are used to “sitting around the same table year in year out, talking to each other, and discussing whether and how much progress they’ve made against...tangible aspirations”. Further, it was acknowledged that while recent summits – e.g., the Food Systems Summit and Nutrition for Growth – may not have achieved as much in terms of concrete actions as some had hoped, they still served to create a collective commitment to addressing hunger as a priority and establishing some degree of consensus around its drivers. Both were noted as important precursors to action.
- However, two missing elements were noted for national accountability mechanisms:
 1. Recommendations for sub-national, local authorities, as well as the concordant data disaggregation, monitoring and reporting mechanisms that would support that level of granularity in accountability.
 2. Equity of representation to ensure that everyone’s voice is heard, which respondents noted was particularly important in contexts in which political dynamics might favor misrepresentation of data and analysis.

“I DON’T KNOW IF COVID-19 HAS MADE US MORE RESILIENT, BUT IT JUST MADE US UNDERSTAND THAT IF WE GO THROUGH THIS AGAIN, WE NOW KNOW WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE...WE’RE MORE PREPARED.”

Diverse participation was, therefore, seen as a mechanism to hold national governments accountable within existing systems and channels.

Yet there were lingering questions about how to foster this type of diversity in a way that sustainably builds citizen-level capacity – one individual asked, “how do you give people the tools to hold their own governments accountable?”

- Moving beyond national, government-led accountability, the main gap identified was in terms of the private sector, which some noted was “outside of the NGO wheelhouse” as a reason why it had not been tangibly integrated within existing accountability mechanisms to-date. Top challenges in fostering private sector accountability included:
 - Company accountability is stronger to their own stakeholders and corporate structure than it is to governments or the public sector writ large. Change must be incentivized within the corporate business model itself in a way that aligns with and contributes to the acceleration of efforts towards hunger eradication. It was suggested that the hunger-community might learn from what has been done in creating regenerative business models that are more productively contributing to reduce climate change.
 - Focus must extend beyond thinking of only production-based dynamics to holistically consider the private sector’s role, including but not limited to food waste. Interestingly, a tension arose in which these considerations were simultaneously considered “outside of our scope” as well as critical for improved management of resources that would align with other on-going efforts in the climate change agenda.
 - Efforts must be made to limit corporate influence in politics, especially in ways that undermine national government accountability or other actions/programs intended to contribute to hunger’s eradication.
- Finally, power dynamics were raised as a key driver in limiting the potential positive contribution of the private sector. As one participant noted, “a lot of what fuels inequality are the outcomes of like really unethical capitalism and so...the ones perpetuating inequality and those who are capitalizing on it definitely have a major accountability in helping solve the problem that they have created.”

5. EMPTY CALORIES

Shifting the paradigm from quantity to quality of consumption patterns and from malnutrition treatment to prevention will allow us to better address emergent crises, such as increases in non-communicable diseases.

- Notions of hunger traditionally have revolved around “acute” hunger and responding to crisis situations, but the new wave of nutritional crisis “may be not so much in acute terms but... that people are not fulfilling their nutritional needs.”

“HOW DO YOU INCENTIVIZE COMPANIES NOT TO CREATE WASTE...AND THEN TO DILIGENTLY STEWARD THEIR EXCESS IN A WAY THAT’S SUSTAINABLE AND HELPFUL TO PEOPLE? HOW DO WE MANAGE RESOURCES BETTER...IN A WAY THAT INCENTIVIZES BUSINESSES TO STEWARD THEIR RESOURCES IN A MORE APPROPRIATE WAY?”
- Overall, there was recognition that “hunger is not always the quantity” of food consumed, but that hidden hunger must be considered as well. More specifically, nutritional quality as defined through micronutrients and nutrient availability must be pushed forward as an increasing concern. As one participant noted, “a cup full of fresh fruits and vegetables cost \$4.99” meanwhile “a cup full of french fries cost \$0.99,” noting that this constitutes a paradigm shift away from food production towards making healthy food affordable for “as many people as we can.”

- Discussants noted that this is a topic currently underrepresented in the hunger agenda, especially in terms of empty-calories, food deserts, and a concerted trajectory around “where we’re going with NCDs”. Moreover, they emphasized that the solutions to these trends are very different and that the sector is not prepared to address these challenges in the medium to long-term.
- It was noted that there continues to be a focus in the sector on either: (a) agricultural production, whereas urbanization trends have led to increases in cash-based livelihoods that have not yet been appropriately addressed, or (b) an overreliance on a supply chain for nutritional products (e.g., Plumpy’nut) dominated by the West, with a short-term treatment focused lens instead of a view towards long-term outcomes. As one individual expressed, “the choices people are making about food are no doubt having a dramatic impact on their health outcomes” and another said that we need to shift the way we think about “tackling malnutrition on a global scale.”
- Building upon the need to leverage the role of the private sector, as noted in the above theme around accountability, participants noted that given increasing urbanization, incentivizing shifts in the private sector towards more nutritional products will be critical. They also noted that this is something that “the nutrition community has not done very well” to date. There has instead been “a lot of contention” referenced specifically in terms of recent discussions around breast milk substitutes, but also in terms of processed foods more generally. Despite the contention, however, it was noted that these products are “making their way to rural areas just as much as the non-urban areas” and there is a critical and urgent need to find a better way forward with the private sector for nutrition outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** *Don’t assume that a solution will be found by addressing the drivers - try approaching the problem from a new angle.* Traction will be gained by shifting attention to the structural inequities that undermine our efforts. To do this, we must understand how these inequities are embedded and magnified within hunger-related issues, ensuring that we address these power dynamics transparently and systematically.
- 2** *Don’t be distracted by global patterns - go local.* Efforts must re-focus on local needs and capacities. Here, granularity is critical – as one participant said, “hunger happens in the localities” and “it is at the level of its localities that we must start”. Going local, therefore, also means respecting, honoring, and valuing local communities (and not outside technical specialists) as the experts. This would include ensuring a participatory process for defining needs, designing projects, and implementing assistance programs, as well as enabling decision-making on potential tradeoffs.
- 3** *Do ensure that in going local, actions build on and fund increases in agency at the local level.* As one participant emphasized, efforts should focus on “empowering the most vulnerable individual in your community to be able to make decisions....to be able to make choices and decisions on what affects them.”
- 4** *Don’t continue to fund implementing partners whose actions do not meet their words on localization.* The way to incentivize true progress towards localization is to give power to local actors, but also to take away power from those who do not demonstrate concrete, measurable progress towards localization.

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| 5 | <p><i>Do accept and anticipate that there will be funding limitations, but don't let this impede progress.</i> Suggestions for ensuring forward momentum include re-focusing our approach on (a) low-hanging fruit – priorities where there would be scope to achieve substantial progress, whether these be integrated or not, or (b) magnitude – situations where the needs are comparatively largest (in severity and scope). As one participant noted: “with respect to hunger...there is lots of room to have faster progress even without solving all conflicts or solving climate change in the coming years.”</p> |
| 6 | <p><i>Do invest in resilience but be sure to define what systematic resilience looks like in practice and, specifically, as it aligns with the localization agenda.</i> Consider: (a) how new/novel resources – both human and financial – might be tapped into as a means of building such resilience in a more sustainable way, including across sectors and drivers; and (b) how we challenge or re-think our notion of who is in-need and who helps.</p> |
| 7 | <p><i>Do continue to expand work around hazard and risk analysis to progress toward a more proactive and preventative response.</i> Such analysis should integrate climate and conflict factors, as well as consideration of population and individual level risk factors, to better target existing resources.</p> |
| 8 | <p><i>Do leverage purchasing power to hold the private sector accountable.</i> The individual decisions of informed citizens can collectively make a big difference to “force companies to change their model for how they do business and to be more conscious.”</p> |
| 9 | <p><i>Don't lose sight of the longer-term trends for nutrition.</i> Planning must start now for the on-coming trend of non-communicable diseases across contexts, instead of continuing to focus solely on undernutrition and/or malnutrition treatment.</p> |
| 10 | <p><i>Finally, individuals should remind themselves to be open to and accepting of transformation.</i> This openness must be led by an awareness and active recognition of their own biases, as well as how these biases inform their perceptions and recommendations for action. Change will come only through accountability and individual-level accountability is the starting point for true change.</p> |

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