



FIXING OUR FOOD

Debunking 10 myths about the global food system and what drives hunger

Executive summary

www.oxfam.org



OXFAM

Our unequal global food system is unsustainable for people and planet. We urgently need to rethink how the world feeds its people.

The food crisis we are facing is not new. Extreme inequality and poverty, rights abuses, conflict, climate change and inflation – exacerbated by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine – mean that hundreds of millions of people do not have enough to eat. While millions of people are struggling to find their next meal, the world's main food traders have made record profits, adding billions to their collective wealth.

This paper debunks 10 myths about our food system and provides an alternative framing that will lead to better outcomes for the long term.

We must shift our current food system from an industrial, exploitative and extractive model to a local and sustainable one that contributes to climate resilience and realizes people's right to food – one that reduces inequality and poverty.

© Oxfam International September 2022

This paper was written by Marc Cohen, Guillaume Compain, Thierry Kesteloot, Madelon Meijer, Eric Munoz, Simon Murtagh, Hanna Saarinen and Nout van der Vaart. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of Pauline Chetcuti, Max Lawson and Mathew Truscott in its production. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

This publication is copyright but the text may be used free of charge for the purposes of advocacy, campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, permission must be secured and a fee may be charged. Email policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk.

The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-1-78748-940-0 in September 2022.

DOI: 10.21201/2022.9394

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

Cover photo: Idrissa Ouedraogo is a farmer in the North Central region of Burkina Faso. His millet, maize and bean crops have dried up due to the lack of rainfall, and his animals no longer have anything to graze on. A few years ago, he could sell his crops and use the proceeds to send his children to school and provide them with medical care. Now the money he gets is not enough. Credit: Cissé Amadou/Oxfam.

SUMMARY

The unequal global food system is unsustainable for people and planet, and there is an urgent need to rethink how the world feeds its people. We will not solve the long-standing global food crisis, made worse by the war in Ukraine, with the same policy approaches that created it. The combination of extreme inequality and poverty, human rights violations, conflict, climate change and sharp food and energy price inflation, accelerated by the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic, has already resulted in hundreds of millions of people not having enough to eat. The effects of the war in Ukraine are expected to push a further 47 million people into acute hunger.¹ In East Africa, one person is estimated to be dying of hunger every 48 seconds in drought-ravaged Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, as actions have remained too limited to prevent the hunger crisis from escalating.² People in rich countries are also facing increased hunger. The rate of people in the US who do not have enough to eat rose from 7.8% in August 2021 to 11.2% in April 2022.³

While millions of people are struggling to find their next meal, the world's main food traders have made record profits, and the billionaires involved in the food and agribusiness sector have seen their collective wealth increase by \$382bn (45%) over the past two years, with 62 new food billionaires created in the sector since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴

The world has the tools to anticipate and respond to this worsening hunger, yet continues to choose not to act with the speed and seriousness the crisis demands. Current debates on food and hunger need to be reframed to work towards a real, fundamental change to a just food system – shifting from an industrial, exploitative and extractive model to a local and sustainable one, which contributes to climate resilience and the realization of the right to food, while reducing inequality and poverty.

This paper highlights 10 areas where a reframing of the discourse is needed. It presents 10 myths to debunk, explaining why the current framing is wrong – or insufficient – and provides an alternative framing, which will lead to better outcomes and solutions for the long term. This reframing is as follows:

1. The food crisis that the world is now facing is made worse by the war in Ukraine, but it is not new. The impact of the war is an additional layer to a long-standing failure in the global food system.
2. Not everyone is losing out in the current situation. Despite pushing millions of people into hunger, the crisis has also created winners – the food billionaires and the powerful food companies and traders who are able to profit from the current system.
3. High levels of hunger are not caused by a lack of food; farmers produce more than enough to feed the whole world. Despite adequate harvests and healthy levels of food stocks, hunger has increased since 2017.⁵ The problem is more of distribution and of food being unattainable or unaffordable.
4. The solution to tackling hunger is not to increase production, which is proposed by many supporters of industrial agriculture, no matter the environmental costs. It is to ensure more equal distribution and to address demand-side factors which increase food prices and drive farmland use for purposes other than food production, such as unsustainable biofuel production.
5. The answer to tackling hunger does not lie in global value chains. Instead, the focus should be on supporting local food production. As the war in Ukraine has shown, overreliance on global value chains has created massive vulnerabilities, as a high number of low-income countries rely on just a handful of large agricultural producer countries to feed their people.
6. Greater reliance on markets, financial actors and trade liberalization will not fix the broken global food system. In reality, we need to better regulate markets and create fairer and more flexible trade rules for low-income countries that allow them to build stronger local food systems.
7. Paying attention to gender and women's rights is not a distraction from ensuring that everyone has enough to eat. There will be no sustainable end to hunger without gender justice and strengthening

women's rights. There is still too little concrete action to ensure that the rights and interests of women are prioritized.

8. Responding to the double crisis of climate change and hunger will not require high-tech fixes in the agriculture sector. A wealth of practical approaches already exists. The adoption of agroecological principles presents one clear pathway for building local resilience and supporting farmers.
9. Hunger is not an inevitable consequence of conflict and war. Even in conflict there is a right to food. Solutions to break the deadly cycle between conflict and hunger exist and should be promoted, and we need to work towards peace as an integral part of the fight against hunger.
10. There are enough financial resources to respond to the different crises across the world. Corporations and the billionaire dynasties who control so much of the food system are seeing their profits soar. Taxing extreme wealth and corporations' excess profits would be effective in providing funds to governments to alleviate poverty, inequality and hunger.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is time to build a more equal, sustainable global food system for the long term in which no one goes hungry. Oxfam makes the following recommendations to start addressing the systemic inequalities in the current food system:

- To tackle the immediate food price inflation and to ensure all people can access affordable food, governments should urgently implement progressive taxation measures and use them to invest in powerful and proven measures that reduce inequality, such as universal social protection schemes. Social protection mechanisms and food access must be reinforced in all countries.
- Governments, donors and food companies must rebalance the power in food supply chains, and ensure that the rights of the farmers and workers producing our food are respected. More support should be directed to farmers and agricultural workers to expand sustainable domestic and local food production. This would reduce dependence on international markets, which exposes countries to supply disruptions and price fluctuations. It is essential that small-scale farmers in low-income countries are supported in having more access to funding, infrastructure, inputs and markets, and that their land rights are protected.
- As there is no shortage of food in the world but a problem of unequal distribution of affordable food, increasing agricultural production is not the solution. Instead, we must address the unsustainable use of farmland, for example for biofuel production. Rich countries must revise their unsustainable biofuel policies. Subsidies and tax exemptions which incentivize the diversion of agricultural production to fuel production should be dismantled.
- International trade rules – often negotiated to benefit and protect farmers in rich countries – must be reshaped, with greater space for low-income food-deficit countries to adjust their levels of food imports and exports, and invest in domestic food production. There should be tighter regulation of food commodity markets and their transparency must be increased, including by improving data on food stock levels. The development of strategic food reserves should be supported, given the role that stocks can play in buffering the impacts of food crises. New rules should also be implemented to prevent excessive financial speculation from fuelling food price volatility. These are all essential structural reforms in the interest of a sustainable and resilient food system.
- Finally, there will be no sustainable end to hunger without gender justice. Real and radical action must be taken on women's rights if we are to end hunger and the inequality that underlies it. There is still too little concrete action to ensure that the rights and interests of women are prioritized. Public policies must be enacted that facilitate women's access to inputs, resources and services, and guarantee their land rights.

NOTES

- 1 UN Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy and Finance. (2022). *Brief No.2. Global impact of the war in Ukraine: Billions of people face the greatest cost-of-living crisis in a generation.* <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-crisis-response-group-food-energy-and-finance-brief-no2-global-impact-war-ukraine-billions-people-face-greatest-cost-living-crisis-generation>
- 2 Oxfam. (2022, 17 May). *One person likely dying from hunger every 48 seconds in drought-ravaged East Africa as world again fails to heed warnings.* Press release. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/one-person-likely-dying-hunger-every-48-seconds-drought-ravaged-east-africa-world>
- 3 Food Research and Action Center. (2022). *Food Insufficiency During COVID-19.* <https://frac.org/foodinsufficiencycovid19#fi>, based on US Census Bureau figures.
- 4 See the methodology note of Oxfam International. (2022). *Profiting from Pain: The urgency of taxing the rich amid a surge in billionaire wealth and a global cost-of-living crisis.* <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/profitting-pain>
- 5 FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. (2021). *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021: Transforming Food Systems for Food Security, Improved Nutrition and Affordable Healthy Diets for All.* Rome: FAO. <https://www.fao.org/3/cb4474en/cb4474en.pdf>

OXFAM

Oxfam is an international confederation of 21 organizations, working with its partners and allies, reaching out to millions of people around the world. Together, we tackle inequalities to end poverty and injustice, now and in the long term – for an equal future. Please write to any of the agencies for further information or visit www.oxfam.org.

Oxfam America (www.oxfamamerica.org)

Oxfam Aotearoa (www.oxfam.org.nz)

Oxfam Australia (www.oxfam.org.au)

Oxfam-in-Belgium (www.oxfamsol.be)

Oxfam Brasil (www.oxfam.org.br)

Oxfam Canada (www.oxfam.ca)

Oxfam Colombia (lac.oxfam.org/countries/colombia)

Oxfam France (www.oxfamfrance.org)

Oxfam Germany (www.oxfam.de)

Oxfam GB (www.oxfam.org.uk)

Oxfam Hong Kong (www.oxfam.org.hk)

Oxfam IBIS (Denmark) (www.oxfamibis.dk)

Oxfam India (www.oxfamindia.org)

Oxfam Intermón (Spain) (www.oxfamintermon.org)

Oxfam Ireland (www.oxfamireland.org)

Oxfam Italy (www.oxfamitalia.org)

Oxfam Mexico (www.oxfamMexico.org)

Oxfam Novib (Netherlands) (www.oxfamnovib.nl)

Oxfam Québec (www.oxfam.qc.ca)

Oxfam South Africa (www.oxfam.org.za)

KEDV (www.kedv.org.tr)