

# The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (2021)

## Summary brief for business

“The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World” (SOFI2021) report, launched on 12 July 2021, is an annual report that estimates worldwide hunger levels and provides a spotlight on the diet quality around the world. SOFI2021, launched by the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO) shows the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had on food insecurity and malnutrition.

**Hunger has been on the rise for the past few years but the SOFI2021 report shows that numbers have dramatically worsened, with about one tenth of the global population undernourished in 2020, equating to around 811 million people.**

The report warns that this is now a critical juncture and that without appropriate actions the world will not deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Especially on SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), the world will miss its mark by a margin of 660 million people if current trends continue.

The COVID-19 pandemic compounded the challenges from extreme weather events, conflicts and economic recessions and downturns which are driving increased malnutrition.

The report calls for a holistic approach to transforming our food system by urging stakeholders across sectors to implement six different pathways, including building resilience to climate and economic shocks in local communities, intervening in supply chains, ensure nutritious food is affordable, changing food environments and consumer behavior.

Several key events, in which WBCSD will also be involved, such as the Food Systems Summit, COP26 and the Nutrition for Growth Summit are all highlighted as key milestones to advocate for taking urgent action to transform our food systems and ensure they are more sustainable.

### WANT TO LEARN MORE?

WBCSD is helping lead private sector engagement in the Food Systems Pre-Summit and Summit by convening the Private Sector Guiding Group (PSGG) to support business mobilization towards the Summit. A key output from the PSGG is [a Business Declaration](#), summarizing the ambition and priorities for business to help deliver food systems transformation.

Operationalizing the [CEO Guide to Food Systems Transformation](#), the [WBCSD Food & Agriculture Roadmap chapters](#) provide a guide to business-led action to deliver net zero, nature positive agriculture, equitable rural livelihoods, and positive nutrition and consumption.

WBCSD-led Science-to-Policy Dialogues resulted in co-constructed policy recommendations together with representatives from academia, business and civil society. Please see the summary paper from the Dialogue on [consumer perspectives](#) and the summary paper from the Dialogue on a [production and equity perspective](#).

## Headlines you need to know from the report

**Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was not on track to meet commitments to end world hunger and malnutrition by 2030 and the negative effects of the pandemic have made this goal even more challenging.**

Due to data collection limits caused by the pandemic, reported results for 2020 are not based on country-reported data, but rather on assessing available data regarding food supply and reasonable assumptions on inequality in access to food:

- Between 720 and 811 million people in the world faced hunger in 2020 – 118 million more than in 2019.
- Around 660 million people may still face hunger in 2030, in part due to lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on global food security – 30 million more people than in a scenario in which the pandemic had not occurred.
- While the global prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity has been slowly on the rise since 2014, the estimated increase in 2020 was equal to that of the previous five years combined.
- Nearly one in three people in the world (2.37 billion) did not have access to adequate food in 2020 – an increase of almost 320 million people in just one year.
- Close to 12% of the global population was severely food insecure in 2020, representing 928 million people – 148 million more than in 2019.
- The high cost of healthy diets coupled with persistent high levels of income inequality put healthy diets out of reach for around 3 billion people, especially the poor, in every region of the world in 2019. This number increased in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**While the COVID-19 pandemic has restricted access to data on nutritional outcomes, modeling has projected increases in malnutrition in both moderate and pessimistic scenarios.**

The current rates have stalled or are worsening on child stunting low birthweights, overweight and wasting children, anemia in women of reproductive age and adult obesity.

**Due in large part to the pandemic, countries have been unable to provide the same levels of essential nutrition with coverage declining by 40% globally.**

The most vulnerable regions were most affected, Africa and Asia, which have the greatest proportion of all forms of child malnutrition, saw the largest declines in essential nutrition services. There is risk for these negative impacts to be compounded through the intergenerational effects of malnutrition.

Economic downturns in 2020, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, contributed to one of the largest increases in hunger in decades, accelerating an increase in hunger over the last ten years. **The report highlights four main drivers for this increase in hunger and malnutrition:**

- Conflict
- Climate variability and extremes
- Economic slowdowns and downturns (now exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic)
- Unaffordability of healthy diets

Poverty and inequality amplify the negative impacts of the above drivers on both hunger and malnutrition. Increasing income inequality has counteracted prior positive impacts on food insecurity due to economic growth, particularly for marginalized groups. For example, the food insecurity gender gap increased through the COVID-19 pandemic, with the prevalence of food insecurity 10% higher among women than men (compared to 6% in 2019).

**Income inequality has a disproportionate effect on access to healthy diets since low-income populations use large portions of their income to buy food.**

Healthy diets protect against all forms of malnutrition and reduce the likelihood of non-communicable diseases (i.e. diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer) and unaffordability of healthy diets is strongly correlated with food insecurity.

**Healthy diets can also support climate change mitigation since the hidden costs of these diets are lower than current consumption patterns:**

- On average, the cost of a healthy diet is 60% greater than one that meets essential nutrient requirements and this cost increased by 7.9% between 2017 and 2019.
- While 2020 changes in healthy diet costs could not specifically be measured, they have likely increased due to the dual impact of income loss and inflation in consumer food prices. The cost of nutritious food was increasing prior to 2020 due to drivers both external (i.e. conflict and climate shocks) and internal (i.e. low productivity and inefficiency) to food systems.

**Within the last decade, both the frequency and intensity of these drivers has increased, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, increasing hunger and malnutrition in communities already struggling with food insecurity:**

- The report states that 70% of low- and middle-income countries are affected by at least one of the drivers and 41% have high income inequality.

- Countries affected by more than one driver are more adversely affected (12 times more prevalence of undernourishment and 39% higher of population cannot afford healthy diets) than countries with only one driver.
- Geographically, Africa and Asia experienced the largest increase in prevalence of undernourishment. In Africa around one in five people experience hunger, more than double the proportion of any other region. Between 2019 and 2020, Africa experienced the largest increase in those experiencing hunger (3%), followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (2%) and Asia (1.1%). The largest increase in undernourishment was in West Africa (5.8%), likely highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic amplified pre-existing drivers of food insecurity and reinforcing the need for increased attention to the region.

**The report states that food systems can provide healthy diets that are sustainable and inclusive and support efforts to end hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition if they become more resilient to the major drivers listed above.**

**Six pathways are recommended to address the major drivers of food insecurity and malnutrition and to support more sustainable food systems:**

1. **Integrate humanitarian, development and peacebuilding policies in conflict areas** – for example, through social protection measures to prevent families from selling meagre assets in exchange for food.
2. **Scale up climate resilience across food systems** – for example, by offering smallholder farmers wide access to climate risk insurance and forecast-based financing.
3. **Strengthen the resilience of the most vulnerable to economic adversity** – for example, through in-kind or cash support programs to lessen the impact of pandemic-style shocks or food price volatility.
4. **Intervene along supply chains to lower the cost of nutritious foods** – for example, by encouraging the planting of biofortified crops or making it easier for fruit and vegetable growers to access markets.

5. **Tackle poverty and structural inequalities** – for example, by boosting food value chains in poor communities through technology transfers and certification programs.
6. **Strengthen food environments and changing consumer behavior** – for example, by eliminating industrial trans fats and reducing the salt and sugar content in the food supply, or protecting children from the negative impact of food marketing.

Since many countries are affected by multiple drivers of hunger and malnutrition, these pathways must be enacted simultaneously through efficient, coordinated actions. Policies, investment and legislation must be context-specific, cross-sectoral, and incorporate all relevant stakeholders in order to urgently address negative food security and nutrition trends.

## Creating the enabling environment for change

With hunger on the rise, the world is not going to be able to deliver the SDGs by 2030. The drivers responsible for this spike in hunger around the world need to be fought using holistic policy and action from multiple stakeholders around the world. Priority actions include developing an enabling environment of governance mechanisms, investing in

social protection systems the increase people's access to nutritious food, including women and youth in decision making, and use of new technologies where possible.

In the second half of 2021, several key summits will be held focused on the nature, food and climate agendas.

In June 2022, the Stockholm +50 conference will be another key moment to bring forward solutions for food systems. Food systems advance co-benefits and can help mitigating trade-offs which will be key to ensure the world will meet the SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement.

## What can business do?

The SOFI2021 report makes it clear that systemic changes are needed in the ways in which food is produced and consumed to reverse the trend of growing food insecurity and hunger. Focused on policy makers, the report makes the case for multi-sectoral leadership and action and provides examples of where engaging the business community has made a difference in country-level and local food systems initiatives. While the report does not specifically state where business can take a leading role in tackling food insecurity, the six pathways (outlined above) provide many options for business intervention and leadership and shows where further collaboration and leadership are needed to mitigate the growing prevalence of hunger.

**Several of the pathways highlight areas where WBCSD member companies are already making a difference and where work led by WBCSD may further support the implementation and scale-up of necessary changes.** For example:

- *On scaling up climate resilience across food systems*, WBCSD's [Scaling Positive Agriculture](#) project aims to transform global food systems by maximizing the potential of agriculture as a solution for climate, nature and farmers. The project focuses on three priority pathways where business can provide real solutions: 1) climate positive – shifting agriculture from a net source to a net sink of GHG emissions; 2) nature positive – shifting agriculture from being the main driver of nature loss to

a regenerator of nature; and 3) farmer positive – strengthening agriculture's role in supporting resilient, productive farming and food producing communities.

- *On strengthening resilience of the most vulnerable to economic adversity and tackling poverty and structural inequalities*, ensuring interventions are pro-poor and inclusive, WBCSD's [Global Agribusiness Action on Equitable Livelihoods \(GAA-EL\)](#) project is working with companies across the value chain to generate strong business value as well as social impact through 1) improving access to markets for smallholders and agri-SMEs; 2) strengthening human rights policy and practice; and 3) promoting inclusive innovation and technology.
- *On intervening along the food supply chains to lower the cost of nutritious foods*, WBCSD's [FReSH](#) project leads the True Value of Food initiative, which is looking at the costs and impacts of food system transformation to people, society, and the planet, ideally supporting systems in which nutritious food is less expensive than unhealthy alternatives. The FReSH project is also developing guidelines to help companies assess the affordability of healthy and sustainable diets in diverse markets as well as how their products may contribute to affordability goals.
- *On strengthening food environments and changing consumer behavior to promote*

*dietary patterns with positive impacts on human health and the environment*, WBCSD's [FReSH](#) project recently co-launched a multi-stakeholder platform dedicated to increasing demand for nutritious and sustainable food options – the [Demand Generation Alliance](#). FReSH also helped develop the [Responsible Business Pledge for Better Nutrition](#) and companies around the world will bring forward nutrition commitments at the Nutrition for Growth Summit in December 2021 through this pledge framework.

**Continued business leadership in addressing accelerated growth of food insecurity and malnutrition is critical, and it must be bolstered by multi-stakeholder partnership and new ways of working together.**

It is important for business to join collective advocacy efforts to call for ambition from our governments and other stakeholders. WBCSD, through its Science-to-Policy Dialogues, brings together key stakeholders from academia, business and civil society together to co-construct policy recommendations that business can bring forward to international, regional and where applicable national bodies.

The SOFI2021 report calls for appropriate measures to increase accountability and transparency of food system actors, reduce tradeoffs, and establish protections against conflict of interest. These are all areas where leading businesses can step up and bring forward best practices, new business models and innovations, and the commitment to working collaboratively with all relevant stakeholders.

## Working together to deliver solutions

### Additional resources

WBCSD is working with members on solution areas to create and mobilize a collective voice of business and create solutions to deliver against these challenges through the [Climate & Energy Program](#) and the [Food & Nature Program](#), which includes the new [Nature Action](#) project, the [True Value of Food](#), the [Scaling Positive Agriculture, FReSH, Natural Climate Solutions](#) (in partnership with the Climate & Energy Program), the sector projects [Forest Solutions Group](#) and [Global Agribusiness Alliance](#), and the [We Value Nature](#) training in partnership with the [Redefining Value Program](#).

Participate in multi-stakeholder initiatives and business coalitions like [Business for Nature](#), the [Natural Climate Solutions Alliance](#), and multi-stakeholder initiatives like the [Food and Land Use Coalition](#) (FOLU) and the [Food System Dialogues](#).

WBCSD has published business summaries of other important reports over the last year, including the SOFI2020 report. Please find our full collection in our [Business Summaries Library](#). Please see last year's SOFI report [here](#), and the respective [WBCSD business summary](#).

Download the [SOFI 2021 report](#).

### About the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD)

WBCSD is a global, CEO-led organization of over 200 leading businesses working together to accelerate the transition to a sustainable world. We help make our member companies more successful and sustainable by focusing on the maximum positive impact for shareholders, the environment and societies.

Our member companies come from all business sectors and all major economies, representing a combined revenue of more than USD \$8.5 trillion and 19 million employees. Our global network of almost 70 national business councils gives our members unparalleled reach across the globe. Since 1995, WBCSD has been uniquely positioned to work with member companies along and across value chains to deliver impactful business solutions to the most challenging sustainability issues.

Together, we are the leading voice of business for sustainability: united by our vision of a world where more than 9 billion people are all living well and within the boundaries of our planet, by 2050.

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