World must look to South America's success in reducing hunger: FAO Chief Economist

Interview with FAO Chief Economist Máximo Torero on the SOFI 2024 report

Each year, the [State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World report](#) provides an update on the global progress or setbacks in achieving the 2030 goal of Zero Hunger. The 2024 report indicates that between 713 and 757 million people experienced hunger in 2023. It also reveals that 28.9% of the global population, or approximately 2.33 billion people, face moderate or severe food insecurity, a figure that has remained virtually unchanged over the past three years.

Despite some improvements since the peak of the COVID-19 period, significant regional disparities persist. Africa remains the hardest hit with 20.4 percent of the population affected by hunger, while Latin America, particularly South America, has shown the most improvement (6.2 percent of the population), according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' Chief Economist, Máximo Torero.

In an interview with FAO Newsroom, Torero examined the reasons behind regional differences and elaborated on the rigorous methodologies used to gather and analyze the data presented in the report. He also emphasized the importance of the new G20 alliance against hunger and poverty and discussed the current trajectory towards achieving food security for all, today and tomorrow.

What factors contribute to Africa being the region most severely affected by hunger?

It's crucial to examine the details of what's happening. Comparing Africa with South America, a key difference we observe is that South America invests a significant amount of its resources in social protection programs. These well-developed programs enable targeted interventions that effectively and quickly alleviate hunger due to their efficiency.

In Africa's case, we have not observed the necessary capacity to deliver effective, targeted social protection programs. Additionally, it's a region disproportionately affected by conflicts, climate change, and economic slowdowns. It currently has the highest number of countries facing a food crisis due to these three key drivers, with conflict being the primary factor.

Furthermore, it's a region currently facing significant financial challenges, particularly in terms of access to financing. Many countries in the region are experiencing debt distress, limiting their resources and hindering the implementation of policies needed to accelerate hunger reduction efforts.

So, in Latin America's case, is investing in social protection programs a lesson the rest of the world should learn?

Absolutely, it is one of the lessons we need to learn from Latin America, particularly South America. Brazil, Colombia, Peru and Chile have robust social protection systems in place. These systems allow them to react swiftly to changes and efficiently target their available financial resources, especially crucial given the current financial constraints everyone is facing.

By being effective in their approach, these countries can target the most vulnerable populations. Additionally, the region has been recovering quickly from the COVID-19 pandemic compared to other parts of the world. This recovery is a significant factor behind the positive changes we see there. We're talking about over 5 million people being lifted out of hunger in the last three years.

This is a substantial improvement, bringing the region back to pre-COVID levels, which is precisely what we are striving for.

Could climate change revert some of these positive trends in the region?

We have already surpassed six of the nine planetary boundaries. What does this mean? It means that the frequency of extreme weather events will increase. And while Latin America has improved considerably, it still has much room for further progress. Although the region has strong institutions and social programs like conditional cash transfers, it's crucial that they continue to improve and not rest on their laurels.

Why? Because we need a conditional cash transfer plan where the targeting evolves according to where the shocks occur. It is not about simply giving money to the same people as before, but rather directing it to the most vulnerable, depending on the type of shock we are facing. FAO is working hard to find better ways to identify in advance where and what kind of shocks will affect the different countries.

There is much room for further improvement and also for gaining efficiency. We have learned a lot from past experiences, but the region must continue to learn. We are living in a world where vulnerabilities have increased. It is a world of risks, uncertainty, and climate change.

Not only will it affect us with droughts, floods, and climate variability that make decision-making more difficult, but also with diseases and pests that will evolve.

We are seeing what is happening in the world today, but we must also consider the migration of species and the migration of humans. We need to work on that. Now, it is important to point out that within Latin America and the Caribbean, the region that is doing better is South America. Central America has a long way to go to achieve significant improvements, and the Caribbean also has a lot to do to become more resilient, as they are the areas that will be most affected by climate change and are also the most dependent on food imports.

In short, the region is heterogeneous, and we must work to level it out and accelerate the necessary process to be prepared for a world that will change in terms of the frequency of events and climate shocks.

Going back to the main report findings. Can you tell us about the importance of the affordability of healthy diets indicator and explain what changes have occurred in the data compared to last year?

When we assess food insecurity, we not only consider hunger, or chronic undernourishment, but also overweight and obesity. The importance of healthy diet affordability lies in its ability to provide diverse macro and micronutrients (fruits, vegetables and proteins) necessary to avoid both chronic undernourishment and the risks of overweight and obesity.

Notably, this year we undertook a comprehensive revision of the series on access to healthy diets. It is important to note that for accurate comparison, we can only use the revised figures from this year's report. We cannot compare them to the numbers from the previous SOFI report.

This year, we implemented three key improvements. First, we updated the prices due to substantial changes in recent years, utilizing new World Bank data to replace the 2017 Consumer Price Index (CPI) information. This allowed us to update the prices of the individual food items within the basket we refer to as the "minimum cost healthy diet."

Secondly, we expanded the series of countries with available information. We used interpolation techniques. This allowed us to fill in missing data points with estimated costs of a healthy diet for those countries.

Thirdly, we incorporated more variables to better capture the diversity between regions in terms of healthy diet consumption and non-food consumption. This is crucial because the proportions differ significantly across income levels. For example, middle-income populations allocate a larger share of their spending to non-food items compared to food, while the poorest populations dedicate a much higher proportion of their total expenditure to food. This refinement allows us to better account for the variations between regions and countries, resulting in a more accurate and reliable indicator.

As a result of these revisions, our current estimate indicates that **2.8 billion people lack access to this minimum-cost healthy diet.** This alarmingly high figure has not improved compared to previous years, highlighting the urgent need for action. We must shift the paradigm of high food costs and insufficient incomes, addressing both supply-side and demand-side issues.

Because it is not only an issue of the supply side (food production and availability), but also an issue of the demand side (people's income and purchasing power). We are working on this and will aim to provide recommendations that can help us minimize this problem.

You just touched on a crucial aspect, which is nutrition. What does the SOFI report tell us about the outlook for nutrition targets this year?

The good news is that stunting, wasting, and exclusive breastfeeding rates have improved, showing better indicators than in previous years.

However, despite this improvement, progress is not occurring at the necessary pace. For example, when examining stunting, we know that half of the countries worldwide are not on track to achieve the established targets. Two-thirds are off track on the wasting indicator, and 40% are off track on exclusive breastfeeding.

So clearly, we must not only continue existing policies but intensify them to achieve our established targets and goals.

One indicator performing particularly poorly is overweight and obesity. In the case of overweight, 60% of countries are off track for achieving targets among children under five years of age.

This indicator is worsening, particularly in regions where hunger is improving. For example, in South America, we see a significant increase in overweight cases. Therefore, we need to continue working on this issue, focusing not only on overweight but also on obesity, which has shown a steady increase over the past decade, rising from 12.1% (591 million people) in 2012 to around 15.8% (881 million people) in 2022.

So clearly, there is significant room for improvement in both areas. We need to intensify efforts to address stunting, wasting, and exclusive breastfeeding while also substantially improving the reduction of overweight and obesity. This is precisely why the indicator of access to healthy diets is so crucial.

Can you explain how all this data is processed to produce the SOFI report? Are there any limitations or biases we should consider when interpreting this data?

We need to be meticulous when working with the numbers in SOFI. As I mentioned earlier, we completely reconstruct the entire series every year. The reason is simple: we receive more data from countries each year, including updated data that might even necessitate revising previous years' figures when new observations become available.

Therefore, we cannot compare the 2024 figures with the 2023 figures or any other year's data. It's essential to refer to the complete time series published in the SOFI report.

Secondly, we must exercise caution with the definitions we employ. In the SOFI report, we measure chronic undernourishment, which we refer to as hunger. We do not measure acute food insecurity, which is a short-term lack of access to adequate food and is assessed in emergency situations. Chronic undernourishment is more of a medium- to long-term issue.

Therefore, precise definitions are crucial to avoid confusion, as people sometimes mistakenly compare acute food insecurity with hunger. These are distinct concepts.

Thirdly, we must be mindful that we also calculate the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), which measures moderate or severe food insecurity. This scale captures a broader dimension, encompassing something similar to hunger on the severe side and both undernutrition and overnutrition (including overweight and obesity) on the moderate side.

This number is derived from a global survey we conduct, as well as information from countries that collect data using the same instrument and methodology as our FIES survey. Clear examples include Brazil, Mexico and the United States, which already collect this data. We continuously work to increase the number of countries that collect their own data, focusing on building their capacity to do so.

Now, this indicator captures a lack of access to adequate food over time, and that's what we're trying to convey. It's crucial to examine this series carefully every year, as we continue to refine and improve upon it.

Extensive effort is invested in working with countries and their official data, which serve as input for FAO's standardized methodology, approved by the Statistical Commission. These are official SDG indicators with a methodology endorsed by all countries. FAO conducts the analysis based on the inputs provided by countries for both hunger and nutrition indicators. For the FIES, as mentioned, we collect our own data.

Interestingly, when we examine the FIES data alongside the hunger data, there is consistency. This consistency is also evident when comparing it with the evolution of poverty. Therefore, I believe the numbers we are providing offer a reliable and consistent estimation of the situation.

We note that many countries would like to have annual figures tracking their progress, but it's important to understand that there is uncertainty between years. To address this, we use three-year averages when reporting hunger numbers. By using a rolling average of three years, we effectively smooth out potential variability in the data across different countries.

Thus, the global number already incorporates these averages, helping us minimize variance.

Finally, as you've seen, we no longer report a single point estimate for hunger numbers. Instead, we present a range. This year, we estimate between 713 million and 753 million people are experiencing hunger, indicating the range within which we are confident the actual number falls. This shift is due to the evolving nature of the world and the drivers of food insecurity, leading to increased variability and uncertainty. We feel more comfortable reporting a range rather than an absolute number to reflect this.

How far are we from achieving the 2030 goal of Zero Hunger? It seems like we are off track. How can we catch up?

We are off track on all indicators. That's clear. If we project the numbers of today, we will have up to 582 million people chronically undernourished or hungry by 2030. This is half a billion more than the target, which is zero hunger.

We need to accelerate the process and change if we want to get as close as possible to our target, which was very ambitious from the beginning. We only have six years left. Now, if I observe all the different regions and I see what has happened in South America, I see that this is possible.

There has been significant improvement in South America over the last three years, returning it to pre-COVID-19 conditions. Sadly, this has not happened in Africa, where half of the projected 582 million hungry people would be located by 2030. Therefore, we need to act and accelerate progress, learning from South America and all regions, to achieve our goal.

The second part of this year's SOFI report focuses on financing. To achieve our goal, we need to change how we finance hunger reduction efforts worldwide.

That's why we need to find ways to accelerate financing.

But we need several things to happen. First, we need to coordinate better. Donors and different agencies provide funding with different objectives in mind, and that needs improvement. We need to increase coordination as well as targeting.

Second, we need to be more risk-takers. We are too risk-averse in the way we allocate resources. Sometimes it is necessary to take some risk. For example, to sacrifice a little bit of growth to ensure lower poverty and, therefore, less hunger in the world.

And third, we need to increase the different ways we obtain financing. One way is to attract private sector financing, but to do that, because most countries with the biggest hunger problems are high-risk countries, we need to use blended finance. This simply means creating a layer that minimizes the risk for private companies to invest in these countries.

But we also need to innovate even in blended finance. We need to reduce the risk through information. That's the role of the FAO, to bring better information to the world about what is happening and where the problems are, so that companies and countries can better target their efforts.

We also need to bring new instruments. One of our efforts is to try to attract climate financing to agrifood systems. That will be central because today, 3% to 4% of climate financing goes to agrifood systems. Yet, the agrifood system significantly impacts the environment (with emissions) and, simultaneously, is majorly impacted by climate change.

Thus, our work on the [Roadmap to Achieve SDG2 without Breaching the 1.5°C Threshold](). We are finding ways to show how we can gain efficiency through a just transition in agrifood systems, thereby reducing emissions and improving biodiversity while achieving SDG2, the zero-hunger goal.

Now, the new G20 initiative that Brazil is launching led by President Lula, the [Alliance against Poverty and Hunger](), is central in this respect because it will help us bring all these pillars together.

What are these pillars?

We have a pillar of knowledge, a pillar where we are trying to learn the best practices from different countries in the world. That will give us the mechanism and institutionality we need to recommend to countries what to do.

Then we have the pillar of financing, which, again, is central because it will bring these new innovations in financing but also try to create coordination among different donors to countries.

And that's why the multilateral banks and the countries' investments—the major countries, the G7, and the G20 countries—are central because if we are able to have a platform of coordination that links what we know how to do and how we can finance it that will be great.

Third, we have the pillar of country impact, working at the country level. This has to be bottom-up. We have to work with the countries. So, the Alliance that is coming out of the G20 of Brazil will be central, and that's why we have made the decision this year, in difference to previous years, to launch SOFI there because we believe this is a starting point for this revolution that we need to accelerate the transformation of agrifood systems.

Clearly, for us, Latin America and South America, especially, will achieve that goal in 2030 if we continue as we are. In the current projections, we will only have around 20 million people in hunger. That can be resolved.

But what we need is that what happens in this region happens in the other regions, and that's what we need to do with the agrifood systems transformation, and that's why it's so important to push the Alliance together with the data that we bring in the SOFI report, so that in the following years we see improvements to achieve the goal that we are trying to achieve.