



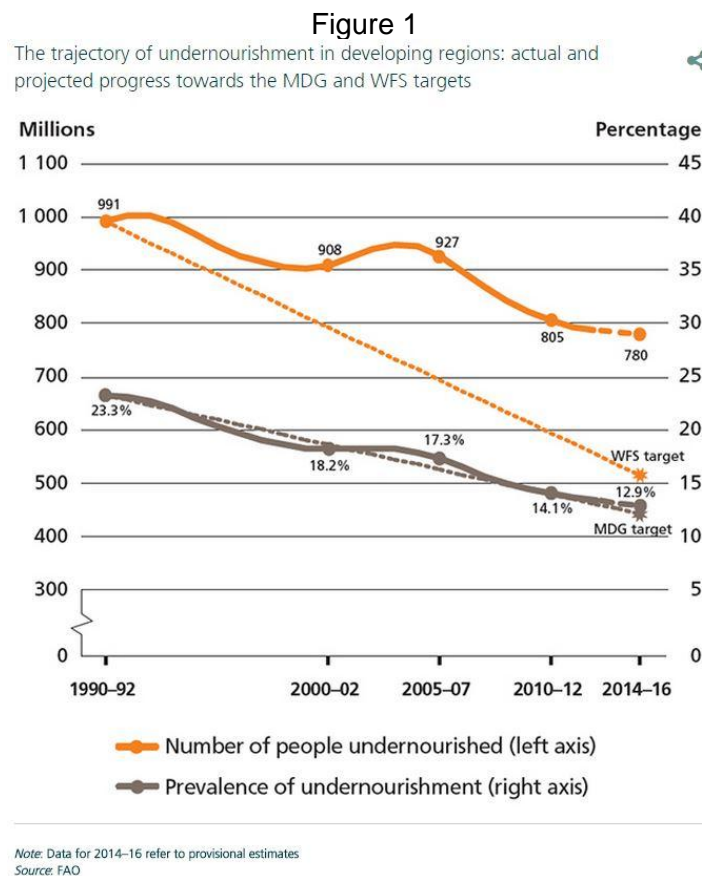
Can we end hunger in the post-2015 frame with food as a commodity? Towards a paradigm shift: food as a commons and nutrition as a public good

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Introduction

The Rome-based UN agencies dealing with food and hunger (FAO-IFAD-WFP, 2015) say 795 million people were chronically undernourished² in 2014-2016 in the world, 216 million lower than in 1990-1992, an 18.6% to 10.9% change (21.4% lower).

Figure 1 shows that for developing countries, undernourishment fell from 23.3% in 1990 to 12.9% in 2015. Hence, the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 1c was almost attained. These figures have already been trumpeted by UN as a wonderful developmental achievement, if not a complete success (“the most successful anti-poverty movement in history”) (United Nations, 2015). Do the official figures reflect reality?



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² Undernourishment is an indicator of estimated calories from total food supply at national level (production + net imports) divided by population to give availability per capita. Populations below a minimum energy cut-off are considered undernourished.

FAO collects and analyses data on undernourishment, and used a consistent methodology up to 2012. Before this revision, the developing world was falling short of the hunger goal, with a notable hunger rise in 2008-2009 due to the food crisis. The revised methodology drastically reversed the trend, showing significant progress in hunger reduction, with no rise during the worst years (it only stalled in 2008-2009), as shown in an IFPRI graphic³.

Several authors have criticized the manipulation of statistical parameters during the 2012 review (e.g. changing thresholds, reviewing departing points, modifying formulas during the MDG lifespan) so as to portray a successful trend towards achieving MDG1. The current figure of 795 million represents an assumed calorie consumption needed for a sedentary lifestyle. Moore-Lappé et al. (2013) estimated, from FAO data, 1.33 billion chronically undernourished people in 2012, assuming a higher caloric threshold required for non-sedentary activity⁴. Caparros (2014) also described how hunger statistics are mustered by key institutions to present a positive trend. As absolute progress in hunger reduction (undernourishment) was not so remarkable, FAO reconsidered the absolute 1990 departing figure rising from 823 million to 1010 million in the latest report. Additionally, without questioning the FAO figures, Haddad (2014) stated that taking China's extraordinary performance out, the rest of the world is not doing so well. China's economic and social development has lifted 138 million out of hunger, representing 65% of total undernourishment decline over the last two decades⁵. Africa has more hungry people now than in 1990, in absolute and percentage figures. And recently, Hicel (2016) consistently exposes the statistical mustering behind the global hunger figures to convey a successful image that does not correspond to reality. He states that two billion people remain hungry if we apply appropriately the FAO data and thresholds.

Summing up, hunger is reducing but less quickly and reductions are more unevenly distributed than the statistics make us believe, failing to parallel the steady growth in world GDP since 1980 (635% in 35 years)⁶. Current progress would eradicate undernourishment in 2084 rather than 2030 (Haddad, 2014). Finally, the developing world has not achieved the World Food Summit (WFS) target (set in 1996) of halving the number of undernourished people by 2015. The bureaucratic engineering manoeuvres (Kirk et al., 2015; Pogge, 2010) that diluted the originally ambitious and absolute WFS target during the MDG negotiations were based on changing absolute numbers by prevalence and moving back the starting date (from 2000 to 1990).

What about chronic malnutrition?

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG Goal 2) states "*End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture*" as a sort of moral aspirational imperative, though the more specific target 2.2 introduces a rather contradictory and measurable set of objectives: ending all forms of malnutrition by 2030 (i.e. stunting,

³ <http://ebrary.ifpri.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15738coll2/id/127438>

⁴ Many poor people's livelihoods involve arduous manual labour, requiring higher daily calorie intake.

⁵ Without including China, the world poverty headcount is also worsening, with 108 million people added since 1981 (Kirk et al., 2015).

⁶ <http://www.economywatch.com/economic-statistics/year/>

wasting, undernourishment, underweight, anaemia and obesity⁷) by achieving the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under five years of age by 2025⁸. Ending stunting by 2030 requires completely eradicating chronic hunger, which seems difficult based on historical numbers of Average Annual Absolute Reduction Rate (AAARR) as shown in Table 1, even in countries with impressive achievements in recent years (Maharashtra State in India, Bolivia, Guatemala) or during long periods (Brazil, Mauritania).

The world has been reducing stunting at 0.67% per year (AAARR), and the pre-MDG rate was higher or equal to post-MDG (Table 1). A recent estimate on stunting reduction for 2025 (De Onis et al., 2013) establishes an even lower AAARR (0.4%), projecting 127 million stunted children by 2025 (20%). The 194 member states of the World Health Organization (WHO) agreed upon six targets to improve maternal, infant and child nutrition, as endorsed by the 65th World Health Assembly in 2012. One was to reduce stunting by 40% by 2025, compared to 2010 figures. This goal represents an AAARR of 0.7%, slightly better than historical records (1990-2011), much better than estimated trends but definitely falling short from absolute, fair and scientifically possible goals (Vivero, 2013a).

Table 1: Historical account & projections of stunting reduction progress in the world & Latin America (next page)

⁷ I am very sympathetic to equalling obesity with stunting as food-related diseases but I absolutely oppose the inclusion of overweight within the same narrative, as undernutrition by destitution (no choices) cannot be parallel to over-consumption as an act of will (choices available).

⁸ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html>

Country	Year 1	Stunting 1 (%)	Year 2	Stunting 2 (%)	Absolute reduction	AAARR* (%)	Reference
World	1990	39.9 (257.3 M)	1995	36 (225.2 M)	3.9% in 5 yrs	0.78	UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014)
	1995	36 (225.2 M)	2000	32.8 (198.6 M)	3.2% in 5 yrs	0.64	UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014)
	2000 (MDG agreement)	32.8 (198.6 M)	2005	29.6 (181.8 M)	3.2% in 5 yrs	0.64	UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014)
	2005	29.6 (181.8 M)	2010	26.3 (168.8 M)	3.3% in 5 yrs	0.66	UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014)
	2010	26.3 (168.8 M)	2013	24.5 (161.5 M)	1.8% in 5 yrs	0.60	UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014)
Stunting reduction 1990-2011	1990	39.9 (253.1 M)	2011	25.7 (164.8 M)	14.2% in 21 yrs	0.67	De Onis et al., 2013
Expected stunting reduction 2011-2025 if Business as Usual	2011	25.7 (164.8 M)	2025	20 (127.4 M)	5.7% in 14 yrs	0.4	De Onis et al., 2013
WHO 2012 Goal Likely to be SDG post-2015 for 2030	2010	26.7 (171 M)	2025	16 (102.6 M)	10.7% in 15 yrs	0.7	WHO 2012
India (Maharashtra State)	2005	44	2012	28.8	15.2% in 7 years	2.1	WHO (2013)
Peru	1996	31.6	2011	18.1	13.5% in 15 yrs	0.9 (1.95 in last 6 yr)	Mejia-Acosta & Haddad (2014), WHO (2013)
Bangladesh	2000	63	2007	50.4	12.6% in 7 yrs	1.8	Arifeen et al., 2009
Guatemala (166 municipalities)	2012	59.9	2013	58.2	1.7% in 1 yr	1.7	SESAN-INE (2014)
Bolivia	2008	18.5	2011	13.5	5% in 3 yrs	1.6	Laforce & Silva, 2013
Mauritania	1990	55	2012	22	33% in 22 yrs	1.5	De Onis et al., 2013
Brazil (north east region)	1986	34	2006	6	28% in 20 yrs	1.4	Lima et al., 2010
Ethiopia	2000	57	2011	44	13% in 11 yrs	1.18	De Onis et al., 2013
Brazil	1974	37.1	2007	7.1	30% in 33 yrs	0.9	Monteiro et al., 2010
Ghana	1993	34	2008	29	5% in 15 yrs	0.33	De Onis et al., 2013
Mexico	1988	27	2006	16	11% in 18 yrs	0.6	Rivera et al., 2009
Latin America & Caribbean (LAC) Stunting reduction 1990-2011	1990	24.6 (13.7 M)	2011	13.4 (7.1 M)	11.2% in 21 yrs	0.5	De Onis et al., 2013
LAC Expected stunting reduction 2011-2025 if Business as Usual	2011	13.4 (7.1 M)	2025	8.5 (4.2 M)	4.9% in 14 yrs	0.35	De Onis et al., 2013
LAC Stunting reduction 1990-2000 (pre-MDG)	1990	14.9 (11.4 M)	2000	11.1 (8.7 M)	3.8% in 10 yrs	0.38	UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014)
LAC Stunting reduction 2000-2013 (post-MDG)	2000	11.1 (8.7 M)	2013	7.4 (5.7 M)	3.7% in 13 yrs	0.28	UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014)
LAC Stunting reduction pre-ALCSH (1990-2005)	1990	14.9 (11.4 M)	2005	9.5 (7.4 M)	5.4% in 15 yrs	0.36	UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014)
LAC Stunting reduction post-ALCSH (2005-2013)	2005	9.5 (7.4 M)	2013	7.4 (5.7 M)	2.1% in 8 yrs	0.26	UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014)
LAC	1990	14.9 (11.4 M)	1995	12.8 (10 M)	2.1% in 5 yrs	0.42	UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014)
LAC	1995	12.8 (10 M)	2000	11.1 (8.7 M)	1.7% in 5 yrs	0.34	UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014)
LAC	2000 (MDG agreement)	11.1 (8.7 M)	2005	9.5 (7.4 M)	1.6% in 5 yrs	0.32	UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014)
LAC	2005	9.5 (7.4 M)	2010	8.1 (6.2 M)	1.4% in 5 yrs	0.28	UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014)
LAC	2010	8.1 (6.2 M)	2013	7.4 (5.7 M)	0.7% in 3 yrs	0.23	UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014)

*Average Annual Absolute Reduction Rate in that period

Successful cases at country level prove the feasibility of reducing stunting more quickly (1.5% AAARR) for a decade at least, although the longer the period and the lower the stunting, the more difficult it becomes as residual malnutrition gets entrenched in the poorest and marginal sectors of society (Ahmed et al., 2007)⁹. As the post-2015 framework aims at being aspirational and transformative, a more ambitious stunting goal is needed to really eliminate hunger before 2030.

According to FAO, the Latin America and the Caribbean region (LAC) met both the MDG1 and WFS goals, and shows the greatest progress in hunger reduction, with almost a two-thirds drop since the early 1990s (FAO-IFAD-WFP, 2015). This is attributed to strong political commitments, adequate food policies, and legal frameworks based on the right to food and enough and sustained public investments. The region launched the Hunger-Free Latin America and Caribbean initiative in 2005, with a zero hunger goal set for 2025; an initiative endorsed several times at the highest political level in global, regional and sub-regional events. Regional data on stunting from De Onis et al. (2013) and UNICEF-WHO-WB (2014), though different, show that LAC progress in stunting reduction is below the global average (0.5% after De Onis et al., 2013 and 0.3% after UNICEF-WHO-WB, 2014) although enough to halve stunting prevalence (from 14.9% in 1990 to 7.4% in 2013).

Therefore, the impact of global or regional initiatives does not seem to be reflected in higher reduction rates. The political boost is perhaps reflected in maintaining the trend rather than improving it.

The global food landscape and its systemic fault lines

It is said that many eat poorly to enable others to eat badly and cheaply, and food production has become a major driving force in pushing the environment beyond capacity. Increasing water and food needs due to population growth, climate change, consumption shifts towards meat-based diets and biofuel development will exacerbate the already critical challenges to planet boundaries and food security and nutrition. By extrapolating current food consumption and production trends, humanity will need three Earths by 2050 to meet demand. Is it feasible to eradicate chronic malnutrition within that scenario, while we keep considering food as a commodity? Would it not be wiser, fairer and more sustainable to consider food as a commons, or a semi-private good that shall be governed as a commons, and food and nutrition security as a global public good?

Food has evolved into a private, transnational, mono-dimensional commodity in a global market of mass consumption (Fischler, 2011). The mechanisms of privatisation of common resources through legislation, excessive pricing and patents, have limited access to food as a commons, while the social construct of food as a commodity denies its non-economic attributes in favour of its tradable features, namely durability, external beauty and the standardisation of naturally-diverse food products, leading to a neglect of nutrition-related properties of food, alongside an emphasis on cheap calories.

Industrialisation and commodification of food brought humanity increased food production and food access for millions. It has also yielded inequality, inefficiency and unsustainability, and the mono-dimensional valuation of food as a commodity. The transnational corporations that dominate the industrial food system have been considered as major

⁹ That will be clearly the case in China, accounting 45% of absolute stunting reduction in 1990-2011, where the AAARR is expected to slow down in the post-2015 period.

drivers of malnutrition and environmental degradation by operating to accumulate and under-price calorie-based food resources (Monteiro et al., 2011) and maximise the profit of food enterprises instead of maximising the nutrition and health benefits of food to all. Such problems will not be corrected by simply applying lip service to sustainable intensification (Godfray & Garnett, 2014) that mostly addresses the technological challenges and obscures the social and power imbalances.

Commodification of food: nutrition is secondary

The development of food as a pure commodity conflicts with our survival, self-identity and community life: as a basic human nutritional need (Maslow, 1943); as a pillar of every national culture (Montanori, 2006); as a fundamental human right that should be guaranteed to every citizen (United Nations, 1966); and as a natural resource involving sustainable production. A commodity approach conflates value and price (understanding the former in terms of the latter). Under capitalism, the value in use (a biological necessity) is highly dissociated from its value in exchange (price in the market) (Timmer et al., 1983), with price having primacy (McMichael, 2009). Food as a pure commodity can be speculated on by investors, modified genetically and patented by corporations, or diverted from human consumption to maximise profit. Nutritional quality can be overshadowed by a focus on higher returns to investment, and recent narratives attempt to demonstrate the financial profitability of reducing hunger (IFPRI, 2014), because profit maximisation seems to rule the world, competing with moral grounds and politics.

The corporate (neoliberal) food regime defines a set of rules institutionalising corporate power in the world food system by radically undermining its non-monetary dimensions (Pechlaner and Otero, 2010). Market rules not only put prices on foodstuff, they can corrupt their original nature in doing so (Sandel, 2012). Commodification explains the roots of the failure of the global food system (Magdoff and Tokar, 2010; Zerbe, 2009) and therefore the most revolutionary and structural mindshift is to re-value the multiple dimensions of food for humans, beyond its artificially low price in the market.

Nevertheless, major analyses on flaws in the global food system and the very existence of hunger do not question the nature of food as a private good (FAO, 2012; UK Government, 2011; United Nations, 2012; World Bank, 2008; WEF, 2013; WHO, 2014). Despite previous efforts within the UN system (Kaul et al., 2003), neither is food and nutrition security considered as a global public good nor food a commons.

Towards food as a commons: Innovative approaches to re-commonification

The re-commonification of food implies a shift in the economic and political narratives around food production, consumption and ethical considerations. Goods often become private or public through deliberate policy choices. Excludability and rivalry, as used to define private/public/common goods, are social constructs, and their extent depends on the nature of the good, the consumption/utilisation rate, technological developments and the definition and enforcement of property rights defined by entitlements, regulations and sanctions. Revisiting the economic consideration of food as a private good is thus recommended if hunger eradication is to be achieved at global level.

Food has not always been regarded as a pure commodity. Many societies have considered, and still consider, food as a commons, as well as the land and water and its forests and

fisheries; and the consideration different civilisations have assigned to food-producing commons is rather diverse and certainly evolving. Well-documented examples of live and functional food-producing commons exist at both ends of the developmental scale (Vivero, 2014) such as lobsters-fisheries in the USA, Ejidos in Mexico, shell-nurseries in Spain and communal landplots all over Africa. The agricultural and related utility of commons to human societies has enabled their survival, despite the waves of enclosure, misappropriations and legal privatisations.

Over the last 20 years, there have been two parallel streams of civic collective actions for food: the Food Sovereignty Movement (FSM)¹⁰ and the Alternative Food Networks (AFN)¹¹. Although the FSM has not yet fine-tuned with legitimate concerns for healthy and local food, return to nature and less-polluting forms of food consumption by urban consumers, their strategic importance is increasingly appreciated. AFN also needs to appreciate better agrarian claims by rural movements. Food is a powerful weapon for social transformation and the future convergence of these two movements is expected to mark a movement in the global and national food system governance as they are organisational drivers of change in the transition towards a food commons regime.

This food commons regime would revalorise the different food dimensions. An evolving governance of the food system is being constructed from bottom-up grassroots urban and rural initiatives. Material and non-material food-related elements already considered as commons are: (a) edible plants and animals produced by nature, (b) genetic resources for food and agriculture, (c) traditional agricultural knowledge, (d) modern, science-based agricultural knowledge produced by public institutions, (e) cuisine, recipes and national gastronomy, (f) food safety, (g) nutrition, including hunger and obesity imbalances, and (h) food price stability. The food commons regime would be governed in a polycentric manner by food citizens (Gomez-Benito and Lozano, 2014) developing food democracies (Lang, 2003; De Schutter, 2014) that value the different dimensions of food (Vivero, 2013b).

Importantly for the post-2015 debates and final agreement, the transition towards a food commons regime and a zero hunger scenario requires a different kind of state, a partner state, with different duties and skills to steer that transition, requiring partnering and innovation rather than command-and-control. Public authorities must support existing rural and urban commons and the creation of new commons for their societal value. The challenge for the private sector is to be driven by a different ethos while making profit: keeping an entrepreneurial spirit but focused on social aims and satisfying needs. Agro-ecology, family farming, and more socially-embedded forms of production, such as co-operatives and social enterprises, are examples of this. By limiting the influence of market provision and encouraging (politically and financially) the development of other modes of food provision (state or communal), we can re-build a more balanced tricentric food system consisting of: a partner state that seeks maximization of citizen's well-being, social enterprises with a different ethos that satisfy unmet needs, and civic collective actions for food that revive community bonds, produce and consume food based on commons-based resources and value food differently.

¹⁰ A largely rural movement of food-producers from developing countries that challenge the balance of power in the governance of food systems at global at national level, contesting the dominant ideology of industrial "low-cost" food system.

¹¹ A mostly urban network (not yet a self-regarding movement) of civic collective actions for food that seek to acquire, produce and share food by other means, shortening food chains, producing food themselves, re-valuing non-commercial food dimensions and fostering community bonds (conviviality, stewardship, co-production, open knowledge).

Hunger eradication in post-2015

A century ago, Western societies understood the market, governed by self-interest, would not provide an adequate quantity of public goods, such as health or education, which have enormous benefits to human beings but are non-monetised, as these positive externalities could not be captured by private actors. Hence, universal health coverage and universal primary education schemes, guaranteed by the States and considered as public goods, were developed all over the world. They are being included in the post-2015 frame as desirable goals at global scale. However, food and nutrition were not part of that social contract.

We need a new social contract whereby food is considered a commons and nutrition a public good, a necessary narrative to develop universal food coverage schemes at national level similar to those of health and education. The supply/demand rules will never get rid of hunger in the world as aspired by the post-2015 yet-to-be agreement, since the market does not have any incentive to provide food access to those who do not have money to pay for an essential resource.

Unlike the market, the food commons are about equity, collectiveness, embeddedness and direct democracy from local to global. This invokes a radical paradigm shift from individual competitiveness as the engine of progress via endless growth towards collective cooperation as the driver of happiness and the common good. We need to develop a food system that firstly provides for sustainable nutrition for all and secondly provides meaning and not just utility, to food production, trading and consumption.

Conclusion

In recent years, we have witnessed a shift in the presentation of global hunger statistics to justify the developmental progresses achieved by the dominant economic ideology (Darwinian neo-liberalism). However, as noted earlier, the world is not doing so nicely under the market-driven industrial food system. We absolutely need a paradigm shift that considers food as a commons and to develop political and legal frameworks according to that vision.

Re-commoning food would imply that hunger eradication would not solely be the State's duty, as social enterprises and local communities should also live up to their obligations (food citizens instead of food customers). But re-commoning is just an idea; an alternative narrative that will have to fight the epic battle of ideas (Brewer and Karafiath, 2014) that is currently occurring. Societal changes are driven by culture wars, ideological paradigms and constant renewal of dominant social constructs and value frames. Let's make "commons food" common and nutrition a public good. Let's commonify the commodity to eradicate hunger and malnutrition beyond 2015.

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