

18 July 2023

## Inequality in food systems. Is it realistic to believe that food systems could become more equal in an unequal society?

Last month, the UN Committee on Food Security's High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security (HLPE) published a report on inequalities for food security and nutrition [\[read\]](#). This new report intends to “analyse quantitative and qualitative evidence regarding how inequalities within food systems impede opportunities to overcome food insecurity and malnutrition”, with the view to formulate recommendations on how to address this issue.

Major **report findings** include:

- Inequalities in food security particularly affect people in Africa, South Asia and the Caribbean, but inequality in nutritional status exists worldwide;
- Food insecurity has worsened in most regions since 2015;
- Three main drivers determine food insecurity: “(i) inequalities in food production resources; (ii) inequalities in food supply chains; (iii) inequalities in food environments and consumer behaviour.”
- In the area of production, access to knowledge and finance, to value chains and to markets are key factors;



- Inequalities in education and health systems aggravate food security and nutrition inequalities, illustrating that these inequalities also largely result from factors outside of food systems strictly speaking (e.g. climate change and environmental degradation) that cause more general systemic social, economic and environmental inequalities;
- Economic and market drivers have fundamentally changed food systems, by shaping flows of goods and finance, with implications on inequalities in ability to make decisions and ownership. Dietary patterns have evolved, often in favour of the generalization of the Western diet causing overweight and obesity even in the poorest and most marginalized parts of society.
- Policies have been in favour of more inequalities rather than combatting them, and conflicts have made inequalities reach particularly dramatic levels.

Based on these findings, the report puts forward a series of **recommendations for priority actions**, including:

- Policies and programmes that are adapted to context, focused on agency<sup>1</sup>, seek to undo inequitable norms and address power imbalances<sup>2</sup>.
- In the area of **production**, actions comprise: (i) those enabling more equal access to land, forests, livestock and fisheries; (ii) the application of agroecological principles; (iii) the establishment of inclusive producer organizations; and, (iv) equity-sensitive investments in “research and other rural public investments”.
- In **food supply chains**, actions feature inclusive value chain approaches, labour-protection measures, territorial approaches and, again, equity-sensitive investment including in improved (more inclusive?) information systems and digital technologies.
- In **consumption**, actions comprise better planning and governance that take into account behavioural insights, and strengthened social protection.

Most of these recommendations for actions appear adequate but rather general (maybe somewhat dull) and not sharp enough to propose a strong and convincing package that could really turn around the current trend of increasing food inequalities. This can probably be largely explained by the fact that the wording of some of the key findings of the report does not reflect – and seriously tempers – what the detailed analysis made in the report actually reveals.

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<sup>1</sup> Agency is “what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important. Agency goes beyond access to material resources in that it includes empowerment— the ability of people to take actions that help improve their own wellbeing, as well as their ability to engage in society in ways that influence the broader context, including their exercise of voice in shaping policies.” [[read p.7](#)].

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the report notes that “Business as usual, including incremental action, is too slow to address the scale of injustice in food systems and the rate of change in relation to climate and environmental threats”, when one could argue that in reality, business as usual does not resolve these issues; rather it aggravates them.

Two examples illustrate this shortcoming.

1. First, in the summary, it is stated that “Economic and market drivers have fundamentally changed food systems, by shaping market dynamics, flows of finance, and patterns of global trade to consolidate decision-making power and ownership”. This wording suggests that the root drivers of what is happening in the food system are economic and market drivers. The detailed analysis found in Chapter 4, however, shows that economic policy and markets themselves are the result of a balance of power (see for example Box 7 on p. 85), and that policies are not so much designed by “countries” (see on p. 82), but by those economic powers able to impose their views at the national and world levels. In this context, the origin of the debate between the supporters of market forces and those of food sovereignty (Box 8, p. 88) can be dated back as far as several hundred years, as observed by historians who describe the opposition between moral economists and protagonists of livelihood riots who gave prominence to survival and food as a right, on the one hand, and market economists supporting the primacy of trade and economic laws in which they believed as they developed, on the other. This opposition became particularly acute in France at the time of the Revolution [[read in French](#)]. In other words, economic and market drivers are everything but “natural, given or preexisting”, as their zealots would like to make believe. Rather, they result from a power balance that produces and maintains them, for the benefit of those in charge and their cronies, at the expense of all the others [[read here](#) and [here](#)]. As a consequence, unless this balance of power is modified, these drivers will remain unchanged, and so will their implications on food inequality.
2. Second – and very much a corollary of the preceding point – if food inequality is to be reduced (eliminated?), actions required cannot just be only those targeting food systems (as is the case in what is proposed by the HLPE report), as food systems are part of a broader system that determines their mode of operation to a very large extent. Otherwise, recommendations made will basically remain good wishes that likely will never come true. Moreover, forces at work within and **around** food systems will resist the implementation of most of these recommended action, unless something is done to bring about a wider change in power balance [[read](#)].

In other words – this idea will be no surprise to [hungerexplained.org](#) readers –, the solution to food inequality is not technical but political [[read](#), for instance, [here](#) or [here](#)].

On a specific point of the analysis made in the HLPE report, one may want to complement the view that those who suffer most from food inequality are women, farmworkers and migrants, Indigenous peoples, informal workers and people with disabilities. In fact, particularly in rich countries, poor workers and youths are increasingly part of those who suffer most, and this is a consequence of increasing pressure to keep salaries low, while establishing some kind of social protection (food assistance) that seeks to make bearable the violence generated by the economic system [[read here](#) and [here](#)]. Measures of social protection

appear then as only second best. They aim at mending wounds without taking into account and addressing their root causes.

With hindsight, it seems that inequality is far too neutral a concept. The reality is more violent and made of exclusion. More than 10 years ago, we had tried to analyse various mechanisms of exclusion that create hunger [[read](#)]. The time may have come to update this piece and extend it to the analysis of how a large part of world population is being excluded from the benefits of the wealth generated worldwide and thus pushed into malnutrition (resulting in stunting and wasting, as well in overweight and obesity).

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To know more:

- HLPE, Reducing inequalities for food security and nutrition, Rome, Committee on World Food Security, High-Level Panel of Experts, 2023.
- FAO, The future of food and agriculture – Drivers and triggers for transformation, The Future of Food and Agriculture, no. 3, FAO Rome, 2022.
- Bouton, C. Les mouvements de subsistance et le problème de l'économie morale sous l'ancien régime et la Révolution française, Annales historiques de la Révolution française, 2000 (in French).

Selection of past articles on [hungerexplained.org](https://hungerexplained.org) related to the topic:

- The grip of private interests on global food governance and its mechanisms, 2023.
- Hunger, food assistance and poverty in rich countries (with illustrations from France and the US), 2023.
- Agriculture, food and economic development – Is penalizing food and agriculture a sustainable development option? 2022.
- Obstacles to transition – Why is it so difficult to make our food system more sustainable and climate-friendly? 2019.
- Growing inequalities are a threat to world social and political stability, 2017.
- Opinions: How to stop the global inequality machine? by Jason Hickel, 2017.
- The world of tomorrow: the worrying vision of the High-Level Panel of eminent persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, 2014.