



**FEEDING**  
Humanity  
Sustainably



# Coalition for Feeding Humanity Sustainably

## Summary

Around the middle of the twentieth century, amid an urgent need to feed a rapidly expanding global population, agriculture and food saw a sudden and historic acceleration.

Humanity rose to the challenge. However, new and equally urgent problems have cropped up in the areas of human health, social and economic systems, and the environment.

A new pace has been set. As the earth's resources and ecosystems become depleted, threatening the survival of both the planet and humanity, we need a rapid and deliberate shift toward a more sustainable future.

In our view, the best way to bring about this sea change is to create a binding international legal instrument that would restore balance between international trade law and governments' capacity to strengthen their food autonomy and food security.

## Feeding humanity sustainably

Since the dawn of time, modes of producing and eating food have arisen in all societies in accordance with their environment and culture.

The world's nations have also invariably understood the value of trading the best they have to offer with other nations, including their agricultural products and food customs.

But in the last few decades, the international legal framework has seen a growing imbalance between the provisions governing free international trade and those created to protect biodiversity, safeguard the environment, and sustain agricultural resources and cultural diversity.

The challenge before us is to restore balance to this international legal framework in order to increase food autonomy and food security in all countries, as well as to relieve pressure on natural resources such as soil and water, all while maintaining the benefits of globalization and commerce.

### **The Coalition for Feeding Humanity Sustainably seeks to achieve the following objectives:**

- To give all countries the power and tools needed to increase their food autonomy and to secure healthy, culturally appropriate food for their people
- To enable all people in all countries to reaffirm their culture's food traditions, to learn (or relearn) what makes a healthy diet, and to find the resources to do so where they live
- To make it possible for farmers in all nations to earn a decent living from farming
- To reduce the environmental footprint of agriculture, food processing, and distribution in order to promote a healthy environment and preserve biodiversity

## Agriculture is central to our humanity

For millennia, the world's people have developed crops, farming practices, and local food knowledge based on their needs, their customs, and the resources found where they live.

The very fact that communities exist in environments as diverse as the Far North, Eurasian deserts, the Amazon rainforest, and isolated Pacific islands speaks to humanity's capacity to become food self-sufficient in the most varied of circumstances.

For almost all of humanity's existence, there was little communication and therefore only limited exchange between different cultures. Humans lived and prospered, feeding themselves by maximizing the potential of each territory they occupied. They did so sustainably because land and other local resources were maintained, and often even improved, before being passed on to future generations.

Until the start of the twentieth century—which was only yesterday on the scale of human history—all societies were essentially agrarian. Indeed, most people farmed in order to provide enough food to feed themselves; this in turn allowed a profusion of human activities to develop. Science, art, and commerce were possible only after the fundamental need to eat could be met.

**Today, agriculture is still the world's leading provider of jobs: over 1.3 billion people work in the sector—nearly 40 percent of the global active population.**

**Agriculture is the main source of income for 80 percent of the world's poor.**

**Protecting and sustainably operating farms are powerful ways to fight poverty and food insecurity.**



In addition, food is an eminently social activity in all cultures: people gather to eat with their families and friends. Food has also been associated with cultural and religious rites throughout history.

For all these reasons, food is not just another commodity. Eating is not solely the act of feeding ourselves; it is also an expression of our culture, our deepest identity, and our rootedness in the land. In short, food is a basic dimension of our humanity.

## A productive but unsustainable global food system

Because of agriculture's key role in providing food, numerous governments have fostered agricultural development to meet their peoples' basic needs: support for farming, food processing, and food safety rules ensures that people do not go hungry.

### Twentieth-century challenges

In the early twentieth century, certain advances in medicine and hygiene lengthened lifespans, which created rapid growth in the world's population. Indeed, the population doubled between 1900 and 1960, reaching three billion. Humanity's numbers grew at a rate of over 9 percent per year from 1950 to 1990. In fewer than 40 years, the population again doubled, reaching six billion in the year 2000. By 2020, it had reached eight billion. While the world continues to become more populated, the most likely scenario from the United Nations projects that humanity will number 10 billion by 2050 and remain at this level until the turn of the next century.<sup>1</sup>

What is the recipe for feeding 9 percent more mouths, year after year? This was the great challenge of the twentieth century—and it was exacerbated by the fact that the population exploded in the poorest parts of the globe while stabilizing in the most technologically advanced countries. Humanity met this challenge in part by capitalizing on incredible advances in science and technology brought about by the "green revolution," a term coined in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> This revolution set the stage for the globalization of agricultural and food trade and the delocalization of food processing, which was made possible by intercontinental food transport.

One of the pillars of the new world order that emerged from the Second World War was an ever broadening liberalization of international trade. The ensuing higher levels of trade would later produce a more widespread increase in prosperity, which benefited people on all sides of these exchanges. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was established in 1947 and would govern international trade cooperation until 1994. Though excluded from the GATT, agriculture did feature in the trade liberalization agreements negotiated by the World Trade Organization (WTO), which succeeded the GATT in 1994.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, World Population Prospects 2019: <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>

<sup>2</sup> For a brief explanation of the green revolution, see (in French) <https://resiliencealimentaire.org/la-revolution-verte-et-la-naissance-du-systeme-alimentaire-industrialise/#post-12429-endnote-ref-4>

Today, the global food system is relatively efficient insofar as food is produced in enough quantity and variety to feed humanity. But this is not the whole story: many gaps in the system merit consideration.

## Twenty-first century challenges

Food access is now a reliable fact of life for an unprecedented portion of humanity. And yet an unacceptably high number of people still want for adequate food. Moreover, new problems have arisen that must now be tackled.

### Continuing to fight hunger in the world

We are faced with a strange paradox. On the one hand, global food production is high enough to feed the world; on the other, the seemingly intractable problem of food insecurity continues to afflict a large portion of humanity. In 2019, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations reported that after decades of falling rates, hunger was once again on the rise.<sup>3</sup> Over 820 million people still suffer from hunger. Meanwhile, approximately one third of the world's food is lost or wasted.<sup>4</sup>

We obviously need to cut back on loss and waste. However, the primary driver of famine is poverty; giving the world's people the economic tools they need to access food is a must.

### Regarding human health

At the same time, diets high in calories, fats, and sugar threaten the health of populations on all continents. The annual cost of health problems associated with overweight and obesity is on the order of 5 to 6 percent of world GDP (3 to 4 trillion US dollars).<sup>5</sup> In 2017, one in five deaths resulting from heart disease, cancer, or type 2 diabetes was attributable to poor diet.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> FAO (2019), "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World: Safeguarding Against Economic Slowdowns and Downturns," p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> FAO (2012), "Global Food Losses and Food Waste: Extent, Causes and Prevention"; FAO (2019), "The State of Food and Agriculture: Moving Forward on Food Loss and Waste Reduction."

<sup>5</sup> FAO (2016), "Influencing Food Environments for Healthy Diets," Rome, p. 3; WHO (2002), "Diet, nutrition and the prevention of chronic diseases," Report of a joint WHO/FAO expert consultation (WHO Technical Report Series 916), Geneva, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> Afshin, Ashkan et al. (2019), "Health effects of dietary risks in 195 countries, 1990–2017: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2017," *The Lancet*, 393(10184).

## **Regarding the economy and social systems**

Globalization has also engendered a handful of food and agri-food giants that control not just the majority of trade in the main dietary staples (especially grains and meat) but also fertilizers, seeds, other farm inputs, and genetics. Around the world, the means of production are becoming concentrated, resulting in land grabbing and the financialization of farmland in many countries.

Meanwhile, despite the essential role they play, farmers and farm workers often rank among the poorest citizens in many countries. They struggle to make their voices heard in globalized industries in which entire countries are sometimes marginalized. Lacking any appreciable bargaining power, they are forced to accept what they are offered—or what is left to them.

In many countries, pressure from imported food—still very often subsidized—inhibits the development and resilience of local agriculture. This pressure harms natural resources and threatens the possibility of local farmers receiving adequate pay. The situation is similar for farmers in many countries, whose control over their own food is slipping out of their hands and into those of the global food system. This global system, in order to serve all of humanity ever more efficiently, ends up serving no one in a manner congruent with human needs, which are defined at the scale of individual people and local and national communities. The effects are real and significant:

- Rural flight in less developed countries among those who can no longer provide for themselves
- Growing dependence on imports for agricultural staples
- Devitalization of rural communities
- Weakening of food and agricultural heritage (i.e., the diversity of crops cultivated and livestock raised)
- Decline in the basic principles of healthy eating, observed especially in the consumption of overprocessed foods and in barriers to eating properly

## **Regarding environmental concerns**

Already accounting for significant land use worldwide, agriculture is constantly expanding, often to the detriment of natural habitats. A myriad of factors—including urban sprawl, intensification of production, lack of regulations in many countries, overfertilization, and improper pesticide use—come with major impacts on biodiversity and ecosystem

resilience, as well as an increase in risks associated with epidemics and the spread of pests.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between agriculture and the climate is a difficult one. Agricultural losses represent a quarter of the damage caused by extreme climate-related events (droughts and floods, cyclones and hurricanes, fires and frost),<sup>8</sup> which are caused by rising greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

A large portion of these emissions comes from the globalized food system (including agriculture, the transportation of food and agricultural products, food processing, and marketing), which account for 21 to 37 percent of GHG emissions. Food loss and waste alone make up 8 to 10 percent of this estimate.<sup>9</sup>

The food sector can and must help reduce emissions, especially since agriculture offers significant carbon sequestration potential, which would allow many countries to become carbon-neutral.

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<sup>7</sup> IPES-Food, "COVID-19 and the crisis in food systems: Symptoms, causes, and potential solutions," 2020, p. 2; Raina K. Plowright et al., "Pathways to zoonotic spillover" (2017) *Nature Reviews Microbiology* 15:8, 502-10.

<sup>8</sup> FAO Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (2019), p. 83.

<sup>9</sup> IPCC, "Climate Change and Land: an IPCC special report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems," 2019, p. 58; IPCC, "Climate change 2014: synthesis report," Geneva, 2014.



## Restoring balance

The combined and cumulative effects of the industrial revolution, the green revolution, unprecedented global population growth, and the globalization of trade (including food trade)—all of these factors can be measured in multiple ways. Populations have become phenomenally richer in the last century, but this has come at a cost to the environment, to biodiversity, and to public health. We can no longer turn a blind eye to collateral damage if we care about the balance of our planet and the health of future generations.

Trade is the pillar of globalization and a symbol of stability. Trade in agricultural and food products remains a key feature of global food security. Countries with cold climates, those with few agricultural resources, and those with large populations will always require agricultural and food trade to meet their needs.

Trade liberalization in the agricultural sector, which was established under the 1994 WTO agreements, is predicated on a highly effective international law system. The WTO agreements are binding for all current and aspiring member states, and those who do not comply risk being slapped with retaliatory trade measures. That said, these agreements follow an exclusively economic logic.

There is currently no agreement of an equivalent scope to protect agricultural and food diversity or, more broadly speaking, to guarantee food security and sustainable nutrition for the world's peoples.<sup>10</sup> Generally, economic and social rights are assured by a set of legal instruments, which are either not binding at all or not very binding. They are essentially an offshoot of human rights and international environmental law, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas; the agreements on biodiversity, desertification, and climate change that emerged from the 1992 Rio Conference; and the FAO's International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (2009).<sup>11</sup>

Together, these international legal instruments form a fragmented system that on the whole is not binding, not universally enforced, and not easily implemented.

In summary, international law governing food security is much weaker than international economic law. This imbalance filters down to national legal systems, which must be developed in a manner congruent with international commitments signed by governments.

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<sup>10</sup> Parent, G., "Le point de vue du droit – Protéger et promouvoir la diversité agricole et alimentaire." in *Éric Dupont et al., La Terre, la Vie et Nous – Parlons d'espoir et de solutions*, Gallimard Ltd. – Édito, 2020, 285 pp. ISBN: 978-2-924959-88-6.

<sup>11</sup> The latter is the only binding treaty, but its scope is very narrow.

## Restoring balance through a binding international legal instrument

For all the above reasons, our coalition advocates for the adoption of an international legal instrument that is equivalent to the WTO agreements in both scope and influence.

**International law outside of trade must be developed through the creation of the first universal, comprehensive, and binding international agreement on sustainable food and nutrition security.**

Under such an agreement, each country would have the power to develop and utilize its resources to augment food autonomy and ensure a basic level of food security for its population. Each country must be able to feed its people in a manner that is healthy and suited to its geographic and cultural resources.



## Feeding humanity sustainably

Humanity today faces challenges that are unprecedented in its history, and these require collective action on a global scale. Protecting biodiversity and fighting climate change are inextricably linked to agriculture and food. These issues form an inseparable whole in nature; accordingly, they must also be integrated in the legal framework that humanity is in the process of building.

Through international institutions, first and foremost the United Nations and its major agencies, humanity has worked for years to develop new legal instruments to better protect biodiversity and fight climate change. It is now time for a legal instrument expressly dealing with agriculture and food to be added to the toolkit.

We must act locally, globally, and in solidarity to promote food systems that are rooted in the land.

The international community must, for the first time, clarify governments' rights and responsibilities to guarantee autonomy and security in food and nutrition for their people; to recognize the social, environmental, and economic importance of diversity in agriculture, food, and food systems; and to create the legal latitude for countries to achieve self-reliance and food security. This move is necessary to restore the critical balance between economic, social, and environmental considerations—a precondition for truly sustainable development.



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