



Contemporary Food Crises: Religious dimensions

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A global challenge

The current global food and energy crisis threatens the health and livelihoods of much of the world's people, cutting across sectors, nations, and communities. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate-change related drought and severe weather patterns, supply chain shortages, and violence and civil conflict, including the Ukraine war, all shape the food security landscape. Hunger is thus inextricable from larger issues of global health, climate change, conflict, and economic trends. It is a central aspect of poverty. The majority of the world's 800 million people experiencing hunger in 2020 lived in the world's poorest countries, unable to access local and global food markets. Tragically, hunger is even present in the wealthiest of societies. Hunger is appreciated as a basic human rights issue, though not always understood as such.

Engaging religious communities, from global actors such as the Vatican, World Council of Churches, and Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to national and local institutions and communities, should be an important focus in strategic partnerships including the core Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of Zero Hunger. Hunger has preoccupied faith communities for millennia, and most traditions teach a moral imperative to care for the most vulnerable in their communities. Religious beliefs shape many attitudes towards food, for example through dietary restrictions and fasting practices. Local faith actors understand the needs of communities. Religious leaders and interreligious bodies are often at the front lines of fighting hunger. Religious expertise should therefore form part of efforts, global to local, to address the hunger crisis, as governments, intergovernmental bodies, and NGOs plan and respond to the immediate and long-term challenges.

The present crisis

Over 9% of the world population is estimated to have experienced hunger in 2020, and the numbers have increased, in part because of the COVID-19 crises.¹ Nearly 50 million people are at risk of famine if they do not receive urgent food assistance.² Areas of particular concern are sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA), the Asia-Pacific region, and Latin America and the Caribbean.³ Chronic hunger is widespread, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, with affected children a central concern.⁴

The current crisis has diverse causes: geopolitical conflict, economic variability, supply chain problems, climate change and natural disasters, and animal and plant diseases make it more difficult for poor communities to access nutritious food.⁵ The primary cause of acute food insecurity is conflict that disrupts agricultural production, cuts off supply chains, and impedes humanitarian access to food insecure populations. Climate change and extreme weather events, such as droughts and floods, are taking an increasingly significant toll on agricultural production, fueling food shortages, and supply chain disruptions. The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed the

global food supply, and inflation has raised food prices.⁶ Low- and medium-income countries are hit the worst: they are least able to afford the rising cost of food, and they are often the sites of ongoing violent conflict that both fuels and is fueled by food insecurity.

Pathways forward

National governments, transnational governance bodies, and humanitarian organizations can work with faith communities and FIOs to address hunger in many ways. Areas of action include:

Bolster humanitarian aid to address acute food insecurity. Humanitarian agencies and organizations, including FIOs, should continue to use tested approaches to meet the immediate needs and strengthen the long-term resilience of food insecure communities, particularly in the poorest places. Besides providing food directly, cash payments to low-income households can help address hunger and stabilize prices in the wake of rapid inflation.

Improve agricultural practices for more abundant and sustainable harvests. Ensuring the future food security of a burgeoning global population requires investment in sustainable agricultural practices, including investing in high-quality seed and fertilizer varieties and techniques that protect the long-term viability of the soil. Governments and international bodies should invest in training farmers in these practices, especially youth.

Engage with faith actors at all levels. Religious leaders and communities have a long history of dealing with both short- and long-term hunger issues on the ground; governments and secular organizations can and should draw on this expertise by engaging faith and interfaith groups in policymaking forums and building strategic partnerships that address both acute and chronic hunger in the present, while also preparing for future fluctuations in the global food landscape.

Roles of faith actors

Religious communities play important roles in addressing food security, providing immediate relief to many in need and advocating for policies to address hunger in the long term.⁷ Faith actors are engaged in the fight against hunger on the local, national, regional, and global levels from grassroots efforts led by churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and other places of worship to international faith-inspired organizations (FIOs) representing different faith communities.⁸

At the local level, faith groups and places of worship provide social safety nets to marginalized members of their communities; they are often intimately acquainted with the causes and effects of hunger and know who is in the greatest need.⁹ This is especially true in countries with high levels of poverty, such as South Sudan, Somalia, and Nigeria.¹⁰

Dozens of international FIOs from all of the world's major religious traditions focus on hunger, including Catholic Relief Services, Islamic Relief Worldwide, HIAS, Buddhist Global Relief, BAPS Charities, and KhalsaAid. Numerous secular-religious partnerships fight hunger on the global and local levels, including the Alliance to End Hunger, International Partnership on

Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), and projects supported by the World Food Programme.

¹ “Goal 2: Zero Hunger,” United Nations, accessed June 29, 2022,

<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/hunger/>; Joseph Glauber and David Laborde, “Do No Harm: Measured Policy Responses Are Key to Addressing Food Security Impacts of the Ukraine Crisis,” *IFPRI Blog*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/do-no-harm-measured-policy-responses-are-key-addressing-food-security-impacts-ukraine-crisis>.

² WFP and FAO, “Hunger Hotspots. FAO-WFP early warnings on acute food insecurity: June to September 2022 Outlook,” (Rome: FAO/WFP, 2022), <https://www.wfp.org/publications/hunger-hotspots-fao-wfp-early-warnings-acute-food-insecurity-june-september-2022>.

³ Joseph Glauber and David Laborde, “Do No Harm: Measured Policy Responses Are Key to Addressing Food Security Impacts of the Ukraine Crisis,” *IFPRI Blog*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/do-no-harm-measured-policy-responses-are-key-addressing-food-security-impacts-ukraine-crisis>.

⁴ “Global, Regional and National Trends,” Global Hunger Index, accessed August 12, 2022, <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/trends.html>.

⁵ WFP and FAO, “Hunger Hotspots. FAO-WFP early warnings on acute food insecurity: June to September 2022 Outlook,” (Rome: FAO/WFP, 2022), <https://www.wfp.org/publications/hunger-hotspots-fao-wfp-early-warnings-acute-food-insecurity-june-september-2022>; Douglas Fraser, “War’s Harvest: The Looming Food Crisis,” *BBC News*, June 10, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-61756203>.

⁶ WFP and FAO, “Hunger Hotspots. FAO-WFP early warnings on acute food insecurity: June to September 2022 Outlook,” (Rome: FAO/WFP, 2022), <https://www.wfp.org/publications/hunger-hotspots-fao-wfp-early-warnings-acute-food-insecurity-june-september-2022>.

⁷ Katherine Marshall et al., “Engaging religious actors in addressing famine emergencies,” *Economics* 2018-10 (January 2018), <http://www.economics-ejournal.org/economics/discussionpapers/2018-10>.

⁸ WFP, “Zero Hunger: Faith Partnerships for Action,” (Rome: WFP, 2016), https://www.partner-religion-development.org/fileadmin/Dateien/Resources/Knowledge_Center/ZeroHungerFaithPartnershipsActionReportWorldFoodProgramme.pdf

⁹ WFP, “Zero Hunger: Faith Partnerships for Action,” (Rome: WFP, 2016), https://www.partner-religion-development.org/fileadmin/Dateien/Resources/Knowledge_Center/ZeroHungerFaithPartnershipsActionReportWorldFoodProgramme.pdf

¹⁰ Katherine Marshall et al., “Engaging religious actors in addressing famine emergencies,” *Economics* 2018-10 (January 2018), <http://www.economics-ejournal.org/economics/discussionpapers/2018-10>.