Written Evidence on the UK Government's work on achieving SDG2: Zero Hunger

Submitted by

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Reason for Submission

Our team's collective background in and ongoing UKRI funded research on food insecurity, nutrition, social protection, and inequalities in Global Majority countries is of direct relevance to the questions posed in the call for evidence.

Dr. Jasmine Fledderjohann (JF) is a social demographer with expertise in food insecurity, maternal and child nutrition, social protection, and health inequalities in Global Majority countries. She is a UKRI Future Leaders Fellow, leading the Food Security for Equitable Futures project. The project examines the consequences and measurement of food insecurity in Global Majority countries.

Dr. Charumita Vasudev (CV) is a sociologist with experience of working with different socio-religious groups in India on issues of gender, intra-household inequalities and masculinization of child sex ratios. Her current work focusses on the issues of intra-household resource allocation, especially exploring the distribution of food within families in relation to shifts in the political economy.

Dr. Ankita Rathi (AR) is social science researcher whose work has focussed on the impact of rapid urbanization in India in engendering precarity and social inequality—particularly intra and inter caste-class, family, and gender. Her current research focusses on investigating the divergent experiences of families facing food precarity, and its racialized and gendered dimensions.

Dr. Swayamshree Mishra (SM) is a social anthropologist whose work lies at the intersection of gender, caste, and mobility. Her ongoing research endeavours focus on the intricate dynamics of food, inequalities, and social protection in India.

Dr. Thomas Argaw (hereafter TA) is an agricultural economist. His expertise lies in farm households' behavior, food and nutrition security, and rural markets in Ethiopia. He has been involved Norwegian, Swedish, and UK Government and Research Council-funded projects working along a range of interdisciplinary teams involving Plant breeders, Forestry Scientists, Soil Scientists, and Engineers.

Introduction

There are three key points we raise for the committee's consideration:

1. Monitoring food insecurity experiences at the household level masks inequalities *within* households, resulting in an incomplete picture of who faces the greatest risks and consequences.
2. Focusing on children under the age of five in monitoring and programmes misses the experiences of older children and adolescents.
3. Attention to ongoing patterns of everyday precarity is essential. Global crises such as the Russia-Ukraine war and the Covid-19 pandemic are tremendously important in their own right, and can exacerbate existing structural problems, but chronic food insecurity experienced as a result of everyday precarity must also be addressed to achieve Zero Hunger.

We draw on our previous research findings and results from ongoing analysis of secondary survey data to provide evidence on these points in the sections that follow. The survey data we analyse—Young Lives—is a longitudinal study of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Viet Nam, partly funded by FCDO. By deploying rigorous statistical techniques for analysing data for the same children over time, our analysis provides important and innovative evidence on how the timing (when food insecurity occurs) and persistence (for how long food insecurity occurs) of food insecurity is associated with children and adolescents' experiences.

We also provide insights from our ongoing analysis of our own fieldwork data from in-depth interviews we conducted between 12/2022 and 03/2023 with people experiencing food insecurity and economic precarity in the Indian states of Goa and Uttar Pradesh. These data are unique in part because we spoke to multiple members of each of 87 households, including to children as young as 7 years old, to understand the nature, causes, and consequences of their experiences of food insecurity and their views on inequalities in food access within the household.

Inequalities within Households

Typically, large-scale data about food insecurity experiences relies on a single household member either a) speaking for all other members of the household or b) speaking only for themselves, but with no information collected for other household members. Our research evidence highlights that, problematically, these practices can render the experiences of the most marginalised people within the household invisible.

CV's[1,2] research in India shows high value foods are often allocated to male household members, particularly to sons rather than daughters. While at younger ages these differences are not as stark (except for longer periods of breastfeeding for sons, as shown by JF in India[3] and Nepal[4]), they become clearer when children are older. Especially as children enter adolescence, limited family resources are channelled towards male members who are perceived to be more 'economically productive' for the household.

Similarly, data from our recent fieldwork in India shows that, since mothers are the ones considered responsible for the family's food, they often eat too little to satisfy their hunger—eating last, skipping meals, or restricting intake to items with insufficient nutritional value on their own, such as rotis, chutney, and rice—in order to save food for others. This sometimes leads to self-deprivation among mothers, negatively impacting their food access and consumption. This can happen even in food secure families, but becomes even more severe when families face financial strain and food insecurity. Extreme examples from our data occurred during Covid, when families were surviving on bare minimum and women reported deliberately going hungry to save food for the family for the next day. Our data show gender roles and hierarchical relationships within households have a significant but deeply unequal impact on food access, and need to be taken into account while planning for achieving the goal of Zero Hunger. However, it is impossible to document and address such inequalities when food insecurity is conceptualised and measured as a household level phenomenon.

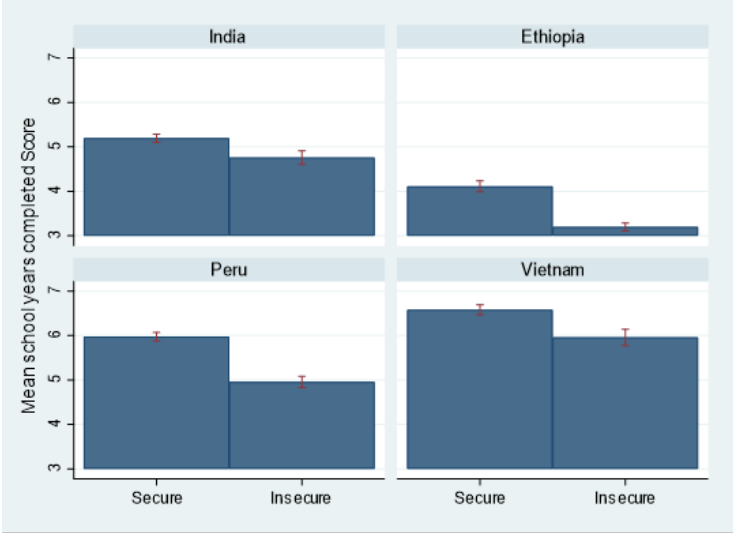
Experiences of Older Children and Adolescents

Malnutrition is a tremendously important indicator in the context of achieving the SDG2 'Zero Hunger' goal. However, while malnutrition can be indicative of food insecurity, experiences of physical hunger and psychological distress associated with food insecurity can manifest long before it shows up in physical markers such as stunting and wasting. Moreover, factors such as poor sanitation can result in malnutrition (especially for young children) even where food access is adequate, meaning malnutrition is not always (exclusively) indicative of food insecurity. Therefore, widespread measurement of food insecurity experiences (beyond physical markers of malnutrition), especially for children and adolescents, is urgently needed. Data collected by the Young Lives team (previously mentioned above) offers an exceedingly rare resource, pairing detailed data for older children and adolescents with food insecurity measures across several time points (though notably measured at the household level, and therefore subject to the critiques raised in the preceding section).

Our published work analysing Young Lives survey data for India shows that food insecurity is associated with reductions in children's educational performance, including language and maths scores and school completion[5,6]. Our further preliminary results covering Ethiopia, India, and Peru also show food insecurity is associated with lower self-esteem, self-efficacy, educational aspirations, and life satisfaction for children and adolescents. Importantly, these negative impacts were stronger for children and adolescents who experienced more severe and more persistent (i.e. for a longer duration) food insecurity. Our examination of the timing of food insecurity shows that, while 15-year-olds who were always in food insecure households (at ages 5, 8, 12, and 15) reported worse socioemotional outcomes across the board; however, earlier experiences of food insecurity appear to be associated with lower life satisfaction, but not with the other socioemotional outcomes by age 15. In other words, while contemporaneous experiences of food insecurity matter for socioemotional well-being, some recovery from previous instances of food insecurity also appears to be possible.

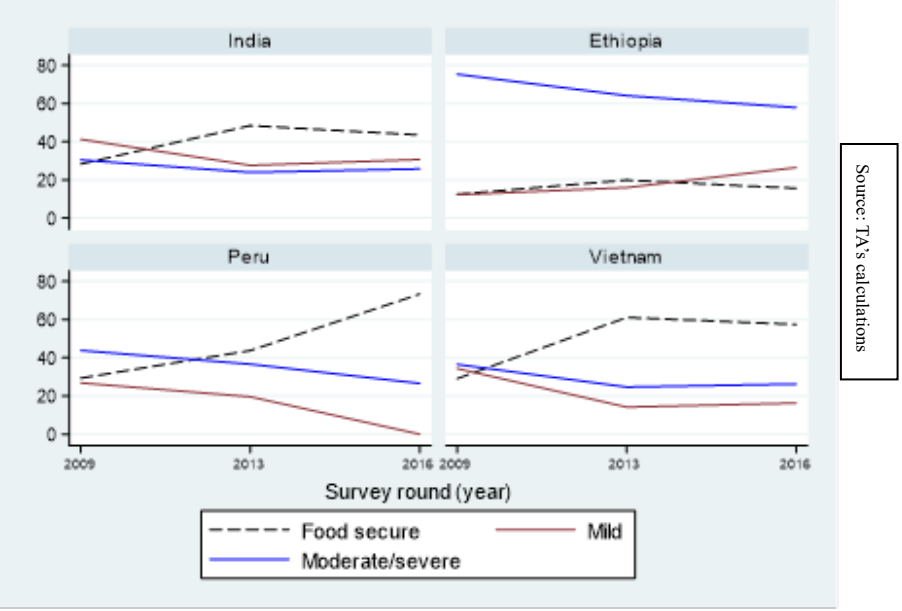
Our ongoing analysis also shows that food insecurity—particularly severe and persistent food insecurity—is associated with an increased risk of children dropping out of school and completing fewer years of education overall. Figure 1 below shows the mean years of schooling completed for children in food secure (bars on the left in each panel) and food insecure (bars on the right in each panel) households in each of the four Young Lives countries. There is a clear gap, with children in food secure households completing more years of education than those in food insecure households. The gaps are most stark in Ethiopia and Peru.

Figure 1 Average years of schooling completed by food insecurity status, Young Lives data, 2009-2016



Our analysis shows food insecurity declined overall for most households in the Young Lives data between 2009 and 2016, though Ethiopia was a notable exception to this trend (see Figure 2, below). However, these data pre-date the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia-Ukraine war, and other recent global events which has driven up food prices. Worryingly, as JF's work has shown, food price rises are strongly associated with increased malnutrition[7] and even mortality[8] for children.

Figure 2 Percent of households in India, Ethiopia, Peru, and Vietnam experiencing food security, mild food security, and moderate/severe food insecurity between 2009 and 2016 in the Young Lives data



In light of our evidence on the substantial psychosocial and educational impacts of food insecurity for children and adolescents, global trends driving increasing food insecurity are especially concerning. For example, TA's work[9] shows Ethiopia has a largely agriculture-based economy and agricultural diversity contributes to diverse diets. The climate crisis, conflict, and market shocks have derailed Ethiopian economic growth, yet Ethiopia's share of humanitarian aid decreased by half between 2021 and 2022 (from 254 million to 120 million)[10]. Meanwhile, the war in the northern parts (2020-2022) has had a twofold effect. First and foremost, the human cost is enormous: Close to half a million (mostly young) Ethiopians lost their life, and school age children were pushed out of education. Second, the conflict has limited access to food and farm production activities. With most households relying on their subsistence production for their dietary needs[9], their access to food will be severely limited. The simultaneous occurrence of conflict and the impact of the Russian-Ukraine war will only exacerbate food insecurity and further limit children's access to education.

Everyday Precarity

Achieving SDG2 requires an integrated systems approach that focusses on the underlying causes of and varied manifestations of food insecurity—there is a need to bring together food, water, sanitation, health, social protection, and education systems in an inter-linked response, since all impact each other. This necessitates a careful examination not only of large-scale crises (e.g. the Russia-Ukraine war, Covid-19), but also of the pervasive marginalisation and inequalities that distinctly shape people's everyday experiences of hunger and malnutrition.

Data from our fieldwork in India in 12/2022-03/2023 shows the lack of opportunities to regularly consume and provide nutritious food was a persistent concern across households. Both adults and children raised concerns that their dietary choices were (sometimes severely) restricted due to precarious livelihood arrangements. Nutritious food like paneer (cottage cheese), meat, eggs, and milk were often considered aspirational foods, the consumption of which was limited to once or twice a month–generally for days when families received wages or celebrated festivals, birthdays, and weddings.

Families we spoke with deployed various strategies to cope with their food insecurity. For example, one Muslim man in rural Uttar Pradesh shared that, despite working as a butcher and handling meat regularly, he couldn't provide sufficient meat for his children. To prevent his children becoming aware of their financial condition and limited food choices, he restricted their interactions with neighbours so his children did not draw comparisons between their meals and those of their neighbours. In times of crisis, several other families bought substandard rice and vegetables or ate leftover, low-quality harvests (e.g. potatoes) to save money, purchased low-priced junk food, and resorted to consuming just roti and chutney, or only bread or potatoes, for months at a time. While some families explicitly mentioned these were survival foods, others labelled it a preference rather than a compromise, illustrating both the stigma and shame associated with food insecurity and, in some cases, gaps in nutritional knowledge. One family revealed that it was only during Covid-19 (when free, nutritious food was distributed by a local NGO), that they became aware that their daily meals lacked adequate dietary diversity. The eldest daughter from the family said she became conscious of the fact that they were just filling their stomachs without providing their bodies with sufficient nutrients when she left home to study at a residential school operated by an NGO. Families often reported difficulties buying basic food items such as salt, cooking oil, lentils, and milk beyond what is provided by the main state assistance program (wheat and rice provided by India's Public Distribution System).

There is an urgent need to explicitly recognize the salience of gender when focusing on the impact of public spending cuts in Global Majority countries. Our fieldwork highlighted that racialized women, often accompanied by their young children, provide intensive forms of unpaid labour in agricultural work alongside household and caring responsibilities, raising unique nutritional concerns for women

and young children. AR's past work with rural women in a self-help group and our team's fieldwork have demonstrated how poor rural women's debt supports families to manage food insecurity and economic crisis in the household, and can also often help households to make small-scale productive investments. Our data show debt repayments often constrain families' spending on food and other essential needs. This can increase demands for marginalized women's unpaid labour, and can push them into extremely time-consuming, physically demanding, and low-paid informal jobs as domestic care workers. Thus, public spending strategies to address food insecurity in Global Majority countries must explicitly address debt, with specific attention to women's unique experiences of debt as a means of managing food insecurity.

Commercialization of agriculture has aggravated the debt crisis, distress migration, unemployment, food insecurity, and inter-community conflict in many parts of rural India. AR's work[11,12] in Punjab, a successful green revolution state in India, shows commercial agriculture development may deepen existing inequality within and across agrarian families and communities. This heightens social conflict, including land and property conflicts between communities and within families. It also increases indebtedness, raising growing concerns around rising agricultural suicides and the rapid loss of land by small landowners.

Our interview data highlight that big landowners profit by transforming their surplus agricultural land into real estate, while wage work and food security for agricultural labourers and marginal tenant farmers is rendered precarious. One interview with an 80-year-old man residing in a village in Uttar Pradesh revealed the anxieties associated a drastically crumbling agrarian economy. He explained:

> *When agriculture declined, so mazdoori (wage work) also declined. Man is earning something but is mostly unemployed. And those who is unemployed, will steal, loot. He is desperate. What will he do. He goes searching for work but doesn't find one. How long will he run? He will run for some days and then next day he will steal something and sell it off. He will steal and sell it*

Marginal, landless, and tenant farmers—especially from backward and Dalit communities—have seen limited gains from commercial agriculture. Our data highlight that households in these marginalised agrarian communities experience landlessness and live in precarious and sometimes unsafe housing, leaving them more vulnerable to agrarian uncertainty of crop production and prices, agro-ecological and environmental crisis (floods, excessive rainfall, crop loss, livestock conflict), and, stemming from these processes, food insecurity. To address food insecurity challenges, it is vital that sustainable agriculture strategies focus on multi-cropping beyond wheat and rice.

While the UK Government's emphasis on building capabilities for adopting green growth strategies and creating climate resilient infrastructure (e.g. UK Partnering for Accelerated Climate Transitions, Infrastructure for Climate Resilient Growth) is appreciable, this must be more clearly coupled with climate resilient agricultural practices that are suited to local ecosystems. Our recent fieldwork coincided with the potato harvest season. We found that many families had been eating only potatoes and rice or potatoes and rotis for days on end. Building capabilities to access diverse diets is critical to ensuring nutritional security. Farmers we spoke with cited the perils of increased mechanisation in agriculture and talk about how machinery has degraded soil structure, making the soil compact and increasing the costs of production (farm machinery is mostly taken on loan), thereby making agricultural incomes/profits particularly low. They also recognised that with the degraded soil structure more *'davaiyan'* (literally medicines, referring to pesticides) need to be used. A major concern was that pesticides seep into their food, affecting their immune systems and making them disease-prone.

FCDO and the UK Government have been involved in several projects that aim to increase capital investment and build infrastructure in India (Infrastructure policy fund, INVENT) with the larger aim of reducing poverty by generating livelihoods. Yet our data show agro-ecological constraints, food insecurity, and other forms of livelihood precarity are still forcing marginalized rural agrarian men and women to migrate and take up risky and precarious jobs in locations far away from home. Many migrant families we spoke with undertake physically extractive, stigmatized, and risky jobs such as waste

collection, construction work, brick kiln factory, and domestic care work. They face issues in accessing residential documentation (ration cards), and stay in informal, make-shift settlements and low-paid rental accommodations to meet the rising cost of living in the city. Having limited rights to access state social protection programs, they experienced increasing indebtedness as a means for survival in the face of food insecurity and precarity. Our data also suggests Covid-19 substantially aggravated economic precarity and food insecurity for many such migrant families.

Covid-19 was associated with a loss of livelihoods more broadly, leading to increased informalization of labour and heightened job insecurity. One family of relatively well-off dairy farmers we spoke with suffered huge losses due to transport restrictions and lack of cold storage for their milk, coupled with lack of purchasing power of those residing near them. Our data show that in late 2022/early 2023, people were still struggling to find employment in the aftermath of Covid-19. Programmes that directly target employment generation for marginalized people (e.g. the Poorest States Inclusive Growth programme and the Infrastructure Equity Fund) are of increased relevance in this context. Unfortunately the drastic cuts in funding towards such programmes can have a negative effect not only on livelihoods, but also on food security. Some single-earner families we spoke with reported finding only 10-15 days of paid labour in rural Uttar Pradesh. Relatives returning from urban areas post-Covid put additional pressure on limited family resources.

The Indian Government support available during Covid in our fieldwork sites included provision of items like grams (legumes) and oil, which are higher cost items, but also very significant sources of protein and micronutrients. This temporary Covid-specific support has since been withdrawn. However, many families we spoke with were still recovering from the economic shocks of Covid, and incomes had not recovered to pre-Covid levels. Thus, many of these families were struggling to buy the above-mentioned food-items at market rates. Several respondents agreed that oil was the costliest item in their diet, and also reported not having bought grams from market since the government support was withdrawn.

In sum, reductions in funding for both national and international programmes have aggravated food insecurity in India, particularly for the most marginalised groups.

Conclusion

We have drawn on our previous research findings, ongoing analysis of survey data, and insights from recent fieldwork to illustrate three points that must be addressed to achieve SDG2 (Zero Hunger). First, treating food insecurity as a household-level phenomenon masks important inequalities *within* households, which is detrimental to the most marginalised groups. Second, adolescents and children over the age of five are frequently overlooked in both monitoring and programmes, yet the consequences of food insecurity can be life-altering for these groups. Finally, global crises are important drivers of ongoing food insecurity challenges, but they occur against a backdrop of long-term, everyday precarity. Too narrow a focus on large international crises can obscure the highly consequential structural problems that leave marginalised groups facing chronic food insecurity.

We note that the data our team collected, which comprises a large share of the evidence above, would not have been possible without UK Government funding in the form of a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship. Importantly, this funding was ring-fenced, and so was not affected by the severe cuts to the FCDO and broader UK aid budget since 2020 which have impacted many projects focused on the Global South. Had we been subject to these cuts, it would not have been possible to obtain much of the important evidence provided above.

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