



June 21, 2023

Global Food Security: Selected Multilateral Efforts

Members of the 118th Congress may consider the role of multilateral institutions and initiatives in addressing global food insecurity. The United States, the largest government donor of global food assistance, participates in and funds many of these entities. Some of the organizations—which may share similar and/or overlapping mandates—date to the founding of the United Nations (U.N.) in 1945. Others have emerged within the past two decades in response to specific events or crises. When considering U.S. participation in these entities, Congress may examine the effectiveness of U.S. and global food security coordination; the role of multilateral versus bilateral activities; Administration actions in multilateral fora; and U.S. funding priorities.

Background and Context

Global Food Security Crisis. A number of factors—human-induced and natural—have led to global food insecurity. Such dynamics, which are often interrelated, include conflict and forced displacement; natural disasters and effects of climate change; economic downturns; and ongoing repercussions of public health events like the COVID-19 pandemic. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has further exacerbated global food insecurity, resulting in higher food prices; food, fuel, and fertilizer shortages; and supply-chain delays. In 2023, the *World Food Program* (WFP) estimates that 349 million people worldwide are experiencing acute food insecurity.

The 1996 Rome Declaration on World Food Security describes “food security” as “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

U.S. Global Food Security Assistance. U.S. food security programs address a broad range of circumstances, from acute food and malnutrition needs in conflict or natural disaster settings to protracted global hunger and poverty. The State Department’s Office of Global Food Security develops overall U.S. policy and coordinates interagency activities across the executive branch. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and U.S. Department of Agriculture are the primary U.S. agencies that administer international food assistance and security programs in both emergency and development contexts. U.S. programs are implemented through a range of partners, including other governments, non-governmental organizations, and multilateral entities, among others. U.S. food assistance includes in-kind U.S.-sourced commodities such as wheat or corn (which are often subject to U.S. cargo preference requirements), locally and regionally procured foods, food vouchers, and cash transfers for food. The United States

also funds related activities that support food security initiatives such as agricultural productivity and nutrition.

Selected U.N. System Efforts

U.N. Food Agencies. The United Nations system plays a significant role in responding to food insecurity. The United States is the top financial contributor to several key U.N. food agencies. The *World Food Program* is the largest global humanitarian agency, operating in over 120 countries. It provides emergency and development food assistance, mainly in conflict and natural disaster situations. WFP is funded through voluntary contributions; its estimated budget for calendar year 2023 is \$19.7 billion. U.S. funding for WFP in FY2022 totaled \$5.6 billion.

The *Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)* is a U.N. specialized agency comprising 194 member states that aims to improve food quality and combat hunger in over 130 countries. Although it often works with WFP, FAO typically focuses on longer-term activities; for example, it provides technical expertise on agricultural sustainability and market access. FAO is funded through assessed (required) dues and voluntary contributions. For 2022-23, its biennium budget was \$3.25 billion, of which the United States is assessed 22% (\$110.6 million in FY2023). U.S. voluntary funding in FY2022 was \$189.7 million.

The *International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)* is an international financial institution and U.N. specialized agency that promotes rural economic growth in developing countries, in part by aiming to increase the productivity of smallholder farmers and the rural poor while reducing hunger and malnutrition. It is funded through voluntary contributions from governments and other donors, investment income, and loan reflows. In 2022, IFAD’s total project portfolio was \$8.13 billion. U.S. funding to IFAD in FY2022 was \$43 million.

Other Selected U.N. Activities. The United Nations has also addressed food security and global hunger through *high-level global meetings* that include governments, U.N. entities, and civil society. The first meeting to address global food crises was the World Food Conference held in 1974 in Rome, Italy. Most recently, a U.N. Food Systems Summit was held as part of a U.N. General Assembly session in 2021. Several *international agreements* also address food assistance and security. In 2013, 16 countries, including the United States, adopted the Food Assistance Convention, a framework to help ensure food assistance commitments and coordination. In addition, U.N. Sustainable Development Goal-2, adopted by 192 countries in 2015, calls on governments to “end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition, and support sustainable agriculture.”

Given the scope of these and other U.N. system efforts, U.N. members have established several *coordinating mechanisms*. For example, in 1974, the U.N. General Assembly created the Committee on World Food Security to help ensure and coordinate global standards on food security and nutrition. The Global Food Security Cluster, established in 2011, co-led by FAO and WFP, aims to coordinate U.N. humanitarian food security responses. More recently, in March 2022, the U.N. Secretary-General established the Global Crisis Response Group to address the interrelated crises among food, energy, and finance as a result of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Other Global Initiatives and Tools

Selected Initiatives. A range of complementary (and at times overlapping) global mechanisms and commitments exist. Some include or work with U.N. entities, while others operate separately:

- the *Global Alliance for Food Security* was established by the Group of 7 (G-7) Presidency and World Bank Group to urgently respond to the surge in food prices after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine;
- the *Global Network against Food Crises* was established by the EU, FAO, and WFP at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit to examine the root causes of food crises and share analysis and knowledge; and
- the *Global Agriculture and Food Security Program* was established in 2010 by the Group of 20 (G-20) to support country and regional agriculture and food security investment plans.

The United States has led efforts to secure government commitments on global food security. In May 2022, the United States presided over a U.N. Global Food Security Ministerial Meeting at which over 100 countries agreed to a "Roadmap for Global Food Security." The United States has also endorsed and advocated on behalf of the "Declaration of Leaders' Summit on Global Food Security" (September 2022) and the "Hiroshima Action Statement for Resilient Global Food Security" (May 2023).

Selected Tools. Most multilateral entities rely on early warning and classification systems to respond to acute food insecurity at the country, regional and global levels. These include the *Famine Early Warning Systems Network*, which provides analysis of humanitarian crises and development programs, and the *Integrated Food Security Phase Classification*, which tracks trends and determines the severity of food insecurity.

Congressional Considerations

Global Coordination. As international efforts to address global food insecurity have increased since 2022, some experts and policymakers have expressed concern that the objectives and activities of new and existing food security efforts may overlap, create redundancies and fragmentation, or lead to funding gaps. Accordingly, some have advocated the importance of coordination. Speaking at the Global Food Security Summit in September 2022, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said: "It's true there are a

multiplicity of [food security] initiatives. We need to make sure that they are acting, working together, that all of this is coherent and all of this is coordinated." Relatedly, some experts contend that collective global action is important to address ongoing food crises and maintain that existing food security initiatives can complement or build on each other. In the U.S. context, Members of Congress may consider how, if at all, any newly established mechanisms may align with existing U.S. policy priorities, funding, and activities.

Multilateral vs. Bilateral Efforts. Members may consider the benefits and drawbacks of multilateral efforts to address food insecurity. Some experts contend bilateral efforts may allow for closer alignment with U.S. policy priorities and more direct oversight, compared to multilateral activities. Supporters of multilateral cooperation note the convening power of the United Nations and other international organizations and the benefits of sharing the financial burden among donors. Moreover, some maintain that multilateral coordination makes the provision of food assistance safer, more efficient, and cost effective, particularly where there are security and access challenges.

Administration Actions in and Coordination with U.N. Entities. Congress may monitor executive branch policies and priorities in U.N. fora related to food security, including U.S. participation in the governance structures of FAO, WFP, IFAD and other U.N. bodies. More broadly, if additional food security mechanisms are established, Members may consider how to effectively coordinate U.S. bilateral commitments with multilateral activities. Congress may also examine the effectiveness of vetting procedures and monitoring mechanisms used for oversight of U.S. implementing partners, as well as the systems in place to respond to aid diversion and other fraudulent activities (such as recent allegations of the sort in Ethiopia).

U.S. Funding. Members may consider how to most effectively track U.S. funding to U.N. food agencies and other multilateral activities, including how the executive branch prioritizes and allocates food-related humanitarian and development assistance from appropriations accounts across U.S. agencies. For example, Congress does not specifically appropriate funding to several multilateral bodies (such as WFP). Instead, it appropriates lump-sum amounts to multilateral or global humanitarian accounts, leaving the executive branch to determine how funds are allocated, often with little or no congressional consultation. Some observers express concern that Administrations may not fund these entities (many of which directly or indirectly address food insecurity) as Congress intended. Some suggest that Congress could legislate funding levels for specific multilateral entities. Others maintain that this approach would deviate from long-standing (and largely bipartisan) practices that provide the executive branch with flexibility to respond to unpredictable circumstances (such as acute food insecurity) through the most efficient and cost-effective multilateral or bilateral mechanisms.

Luisa Blanchfield, Specialist in International Relations
Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.