



Engaging Faith Communities to End Hunger

August 4, 2024

Get progress back on track

A central global target, promised repeatedly at many levels, is to end hunger, which is the most immediate face of extreme poverty. Zero hunger is a feasible goal and ways to achieve it have been quite clearly mapped out. Recent decades have seen notable progress towards clearly defined objectives. Progress, however, has flagged, and both global and local programs are off track.¹ A central G20 2024 goal is to galvanize the support needed across sectors and regions to reenergize the effort and to speed progress towards the goal. Brazil’s President Lula has announced a new Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty, a central focus of the November G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro.

Ending hunger demands multi-stakeholder engagement and active cooperation. The Global Alliance Against Hunger involves wide-ranging partners: many different parts of governments, multilateral organizations, private business, and civil society. It calls for leadership at all levels and community action. Religious communities are key players in the effort. The G20 Interfaith Forum supports the Alliance and its bold objectives. The Forum’s broad network of religiously-linked partners can contribute in diverse ways to global and local action.

Religious action towards ending hunger takes many forms. Clear recognition of assets, roles, and better linkages among them and with other actors are necessary first steps in strengthening G20 roles (including that of the G20 Interfaith Forum). Inspired by their core teachings —ancient and contemporary, religious communities advocate for action and deliver charitable support, for example through countless soup kitchens and their equivalent. Religious leaders at many levels are powerful advocates for action. For example, leaders press for urgent action in places where war and conflict cause acute hunger and famine. They focus on the urgent needs of forced migrants across the world. Religious actors support establishing and maintaining meaningful safety nets and organize diverse programs that deliver —as exemplified during the COVID-19 emergency. And they are on the forefront in pointing to the intricate links between climate change and food supplies. Religious actors thus work to address the complex intertwined challenges of food security, improving nutrition, assuring a sharp focus on the needs of children, and achieving sustainable production.

As the G20 leaders and engagement groups reset goals on hunger and reforge alliances, religious actors need to be seated “at the tables.” Future efforts to end hunger should be informed by clear recognition of past and present contributions by faith communities. They should recognize the opportunities for integral involvement of faith communities with other actors, as well as the distinctive roles for faith communities acting individually or as participants in joined religious efforts.

The G20 is an optimal forum for the focus on hunger both as a global moral imperative and as it relates to goals ranging from equity to security. Ending hunger is central to Brazil’s G20 Presidency, and faith and interfaith partnerships will be critical to its success.

¹ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/hunger/>

The Backdrop

Progress towards eradicating hunger, tackling malnutrition, and preventing obesity has slowed. This is true at a very global level. The crisis is reflected in frequent global emergencies, acute crises of extreme hunger, and insufficient resources dedicated to programs ranging from humanitarian to multilateral development. Numerous national indicators also point to weakening of promising programs that were showing results. It is also reflected at local levels, with a sharp focus on rising food prices and evidence of families changing diets or skipping meals. The world is not on track to reach any of the six global nutrition targets that are part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), approved by the United Nations member states in 2015.²

Numbers released in [The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2024](#) report on July 25, 2024 make grim reading. Over 735 million people are facing hunger in 2024, an increase of 122 million people compared to 2019. Hunger is experienced most acutely in Western Asia, the Caribbean, and throughout all subregions of Africa.³ Adequate food remains elusive for over 2.33 billion people, and 3.1 billion people are unable to afford a healthy diet.⁴ Conflict, climate change, COVID-19 economic downturns, and persistent inequality are driving factors behind this stagnating crisis that affects over a quarter of the world's population.

World Food Program Executive Director Cindy McCain remarked that “[we are back to square one](#)” on global hunger goals. She also highlighted, among the many reasons this topic belongs at the top of global agendas, the fact that women and children are taking the brunt. Equity and gender inclusion are important to factor into food security efforts because “a woman will feed her family.”

Addressing this polycrisis requires a multi-faceted approach, and faith communities are essential actors — even though they are often less engaged than they could or should be. An estimated 85% of the world's population has some religious affiliation,⁵ and there are extensive networks spanning a wide range, from the global to the community level. Such networks include powerful teachings that guide the behavior of many followers. Faith actors often serve as a moral and practical voice, organize food donations, advocate for the reduction of food waste by local businesses, and care for refugees, the homeless, and severely disadvantaged community members. They put the G20 slogan “Leave No One Behind” into action on a daily basis.

Religious actors can provide invaluable platforms in the effort to give a central priority to hunger alleviation, with [calls to feed the hungry](#) a universal priority across religious traditions.⁶ Yet, religious actors are not systematically and effectively involved in many efforts to address food crises. While trust in social institutions is on the decline globally,⁷ faith communities often enjoy high levels of trust, well respected for demonstrating by their actions the moral connection between faith and doing good.⁸

² <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-NMH-NHD-14.2>

³ <https://www.who.int/news/item/12-07-2023-122-million-more-people-pushed-into-hunger-since-2019-due-to-multiple-crises--reveals-un-report>

⁴ <https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/18143951-4b0a-46d6-860b-0f8908745da1>

⁵ The Global Religious Landscape, Pew Research Center, 2012, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>

⁶ Voices of Faith: Statements from Religious Leaders and actors, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/voices-of-faith-statements-from-religious-leaders-and-actors>

⁷ <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer>

⁸ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2020/07/20/the-global-god-divide/>

Getting back on track towards the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) two, Zero Hunger, requires engaging advocates and financing from all political and value-based systems. Religious leaders are and should be central actors in the fight against hunger. The challenge is how to organize their involvement in meaningful and effective ways, given diverse roles and actions. As ever, a focus on context matters.

Brazil's 2024 G20 Presidency offers important assets in the global drive to end hunger. President Lula da Silva, who won the World Food Prize in 2011, calls on the rest of the world to mobilize and finance the end to hunger and poverty. He has called upon all elements of Brazilian society to embrace his goal to ensure three meals a day for all citizens, to alleviate poverty, to enhance educational opportunities for children, and to provide greater inclusion of the poor in society. The Brazilian call is a moral call grounded in practical experience. Three hunger-reduction programs in Brazil helped over 13.8 million families under the Bolsa Familia Program,⁹ two thirds of its municipalities under the Food Purchase Program,¹⁰ and over 40 million children under the School Feeding Program.¹¹ Brazil's G20 presidency is calling on urgent action to get back on track to alleviate hunger and poverty. Faith communities can accelerate that progress.

Faith actors against hunger

Religious leaders can be important participants in the newly announced Task Force for a Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty proposed by Brazil's G20 presidency. The Global Alliance involves a *bottom-up* and *top-down* strategy as it works to revitalize progress towards tackling hunger. This overlaps with the distinctive strengths of faith actors, notably those who work on a community level. Whether in mosques, synagogues, churches, temples, monasteries or in other sacred places, people gather for worship and participate in efforts organized by fellow faith-community members. This year's G20 stakeholders can tap into the strong networks that exist within and among faith communities by re-engaging with religious leaders who can both mobilize their networks, and apply their own influence to get hunger alleviation back on track.

There is [extensive experience to draw on](#), with a remarkable array of initiatives in all world regions across wide ranging sectors. Such initiatives organized by faith actors are, nonetheless, not always well documented or researched in-depth. While better documentation would strengthen the evidence base, available information offers a solid foundation for partnerships and action.

Faith hunger programs span gulfs between what is considered charity and sustainable and scalable social protection programs. Advocacy by faith communities in national legislative bodies, local governments, and global institutions for action on hunger can have wide impact. As revitalized programs take shape, both local leadership and attention to context matter, both priorities that speak to the need for continuing involvement of faith actors at community level. If Global Alliance-generated assistance takes specific shape as discrete aid from external sources, with insufficient local involvement, it risks not only being ineffective, but also rejected. This could undermine future initiatives. Thus, collaborating with faith actors with local expertise is crucial. Areas of particular comparative advantage include programs that serve those in extreme poverty, dislocated populations, and especially vulnerable communities.

Faith communities play financing, organizational, and advocacy roles in the fight against hunger, with robust networks of people committed to service and social justice. International faith-inspired organizations (FIOs), such as [Bread for the World](#), the [Aga Khan Foundation](#) (AKF), [Buddhist Global](#)

⁹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/31/906215778/coronavirus-hit-brazil-considers-major-public-funds-for-poor-and-unemployed>

¹⁰ https://wfp.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/data_sheet_PAA_english.pdf

¹¹ https://gcnf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Brazil_2021_01_24-2.pdf

[Relief](#) (BGR), and the Sikh community’s [Langar](#) tradition, have financed and distributed food, advocated for sustainable agriculture, and acted on the conviction that hunger is unacceptable. A sustained strategic focus throughout religious communities is needed to speed progress.

Faith actors as multipliers for the 2024 G20 initiatives

The [Global Alliance’s Policy Basket](#), which sets the criteria for accepted policies or programs, is consistent with the experience and expertise of many faith actors, across its five criteria:

- 1) Well-defined policy instruments, with a clear scope;
- 2) Implemented/implementable by governments;
- 3) Evidence-based;
- 4) Primarily reaching out to people experiencing poverty and hunger;
- 5) Contributing primarily to reach Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 2;

Governments cannot achieve the goal of ending hunger working alone or depending on siloed action. The SDG17 goal of partnership will be central to success. Thoughtful and creative partnerships with the many faith networks, working across levels, can make material contributions to the global efforts, well beyond what is happening at present.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the planned Global Alliance mechanisms at global and country level. Figure 3 illustrates a central feature of the Alliance which is taking programs to scale.

Figure 1: Global level operations.

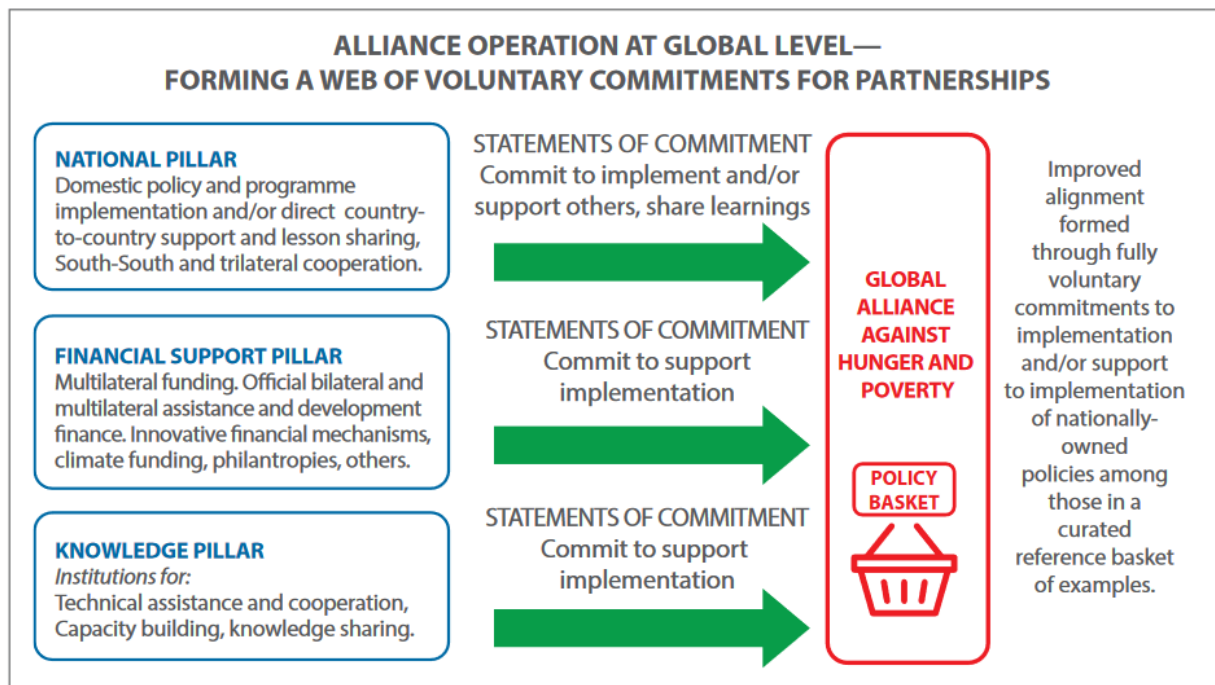


Figure 2: Country level operations.

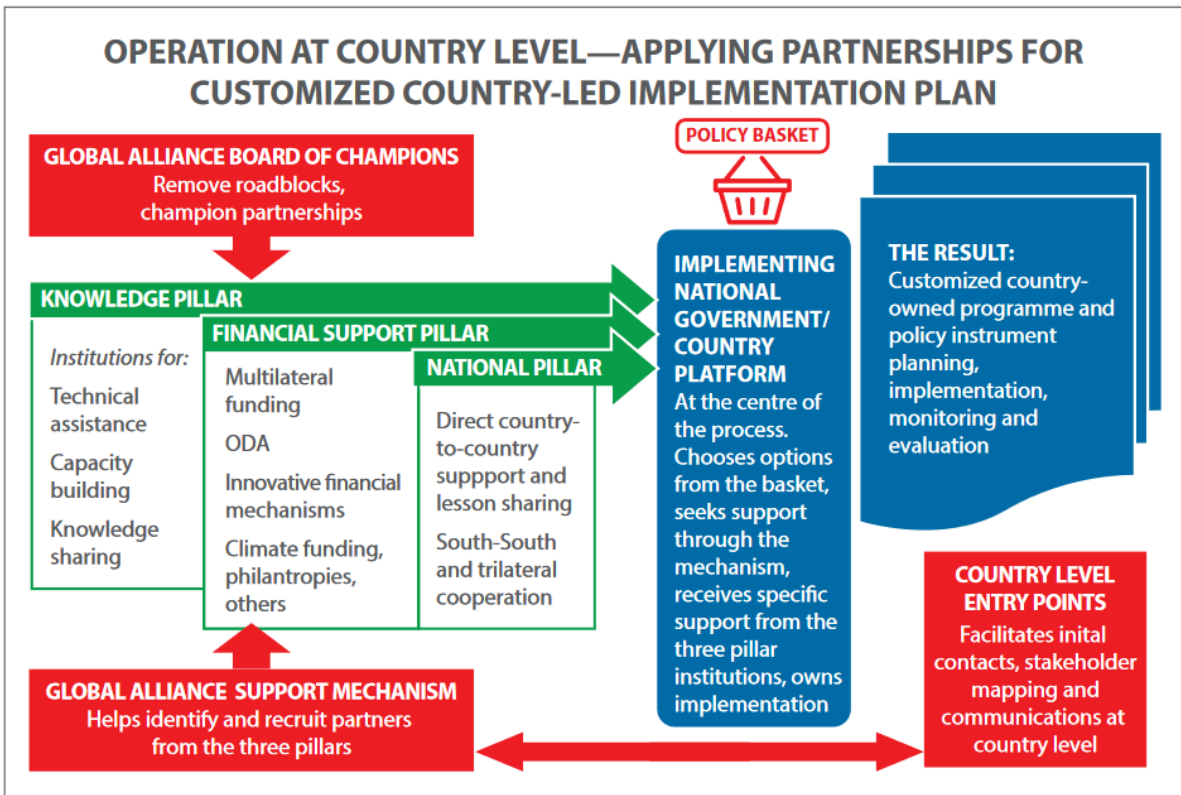


Figure 3. Focus on implementation of scaled-up policy instruments and programs instead of small projects or broad-based strategies/plans/frameworks. Source: Task Force for a Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty: Foundational Documents, p.51, <https://www.g20.org/en/tracks/sherpa-track/hunger-and-poverty>

