

SDG Goal 2: Where do we stand? What do we do?

Vikas Rawal

Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (India)

May 18, 2021

Email: vikasrawal@gmail.com

The world is not on course to achieve the Goal 2. This an understatement. In fact, the world is moving in the opposite direction from the Goal.

SOFI (2020) has projected that, even without taking into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is expected to have 190 million *more* people facing chronic hunger in 2030 than there were in 2015. The advance copy of Secretary General's SDG Progress Report for 2021 shows that the COVID-19 pandemic may have pushed an additional 83-132 million people into chronic hunger.

This does not need to happen. However, changing this scenario requires a drastic course correction and major decision-making at the HLPF.

1. Hunger and food insecurity are the most important challenges

Ending poverty, hunger and food insecurity are the most important pillars of the SDG agenda. The largest number of hungry people face the situation out of sheer poverty. Conflicts and disasters further intensify food insecurity for many.

There is a disconcerting shift in the recent narratives around Goal 2, and a sidelining of hunger and food insecurity from the core of the discussions on Goal 2 is conspicuous. The adverse impact of the pandemic is being used as a cover to give up the fight to end hunger, and instead, shift the goal posts to other aspects of Goal 2. This shift of emphasis must be emphatically rejected.

HLPF 2021 must strongly reaffirm and express the commitment to end hunger and food insecurity by 2030, and chart a new course for reaching the Goal.

There is no denying that COVID-19 pandemic has made the task of ending hunger by 2030 considerably more difficult. It has, on the one hand, resulted in an increase in the requirement of resources for achieving Goal 2, and on the other, created economic conditions in which mobilizing resources will become considerably more difficult.

But, we must not make the mistake of blaming all our failures on the pandemic. Hunger and food insecurity were rising even before the pandemic hit the world. There is no reason why the world should stop making efforts to end hunger because the pandemic has made this battle more difficult.

If we have to make progress towards achieving Goal 2, following three steps are needed to set the ball rolling.

A. Identify priorities to focus action

The HLPF should identify key focus areas as drivers of action on Goal 2. These should be:

1. Ending hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition
2. Increasing productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, and building resilience
3. Sustainable use of natural resources and ecological services, and adoption of sustainable agricultural practices.

It is important to focus on core objectives, and work hard to achieve them, rather than to give up the key targets, and hope that some minor achievements can still be made.

B. Estimate resource gaps for achieving these priorities at the global, regional and national levels.

C. Find resources at the global, regional and national levels to drive action on these priorities. This not requires dealing with difficult macro-economic challenges in the present state of world economy, but also requires prioritizing Goal 2, and decentralized, country-by-country planning.

2. Smallholder producers must be at the centre of action

An important lesson of the COVID-19 crisis is that smallholder agriculture can become the prime-mover of the economy even during a global crisis of this gravity.

With 2.5 billion people directly engaged in smallholder agriculture, and with many more indirectly dependent on it for their livelihoods, smallholder agriculture is a sector of the global economy that has proven to be remarkably resilient to the COVID-19 crisis. While incomes of these producers have been very badly hit, they have continued to produce and helped avoid major disruptions in food supplies. In many developing and underdeveloped countries, for example in India, smallholder agriculture absorbed additional workers who lost their employment because of the COVID-19 restrictions.

Smallholder food producers must have a leading role in the food economy of the post-COVID world. For this to happen, smallholder agriculture needs to be protected, strengthened and developed. However, major initiatives for supporting agriculture in the developing and underdeveloped countries, where smallholder agriculture is predominant, are promoting technological solutions, policies and institutional structures that would work to marginalize small producers in the agri-food systems. **Action on Targets 2.3 and 2.4 must strengthen the position of smallholder producers rather than turning them into cogs in the wheels of the global agri-food systems.**

4. The monitoring system is critical for driving action

The system of monitoring at the global and national levels is becoming highly heterogeneous.

Using incompatible and poorly-defined indicators can result in many kinds of problems. First, poor indicators and data may not give early warnings for course correction. Secondly, using heterogeneous indicators would result in a divergence of assessment at the national and global levels. Thirdly, use of heterogeneous indicators would make the overall global assessment weaker

While the technical agencies were already struggling with the problem of the high level of incompatibility of national indicators with global indicators, the decision made at the March 2020 session of the UN Statistical Commission to make global indicator framework “voluntary” and allow countries to use “alternative” indicators will open floodgates to the use of non-comparable and poorly defined indicators, and will greatly weaken the monitoring system.

It is important to note that the demand from countries to allow them to use alternative indicators

is not only because countries lack data or resources that are required for reporting globally-agreed indicators. It is also fueled by the fact that, we have, among the list of globally-agreed indicators, some that are poorly formulated, based on poor statistical reasoning, and are impossible to implement in most countries.

Indicator 2.4.1, for example, is a badly defined indicator even in terms of basic statistical reasoning. Collecting data for it would require prohibitive investments. It is clear that most countries will not implement it.

Dragging feet on streamlining the monitoring system is not an option and the onus of providing sound technical advice is on the UN agencies.