

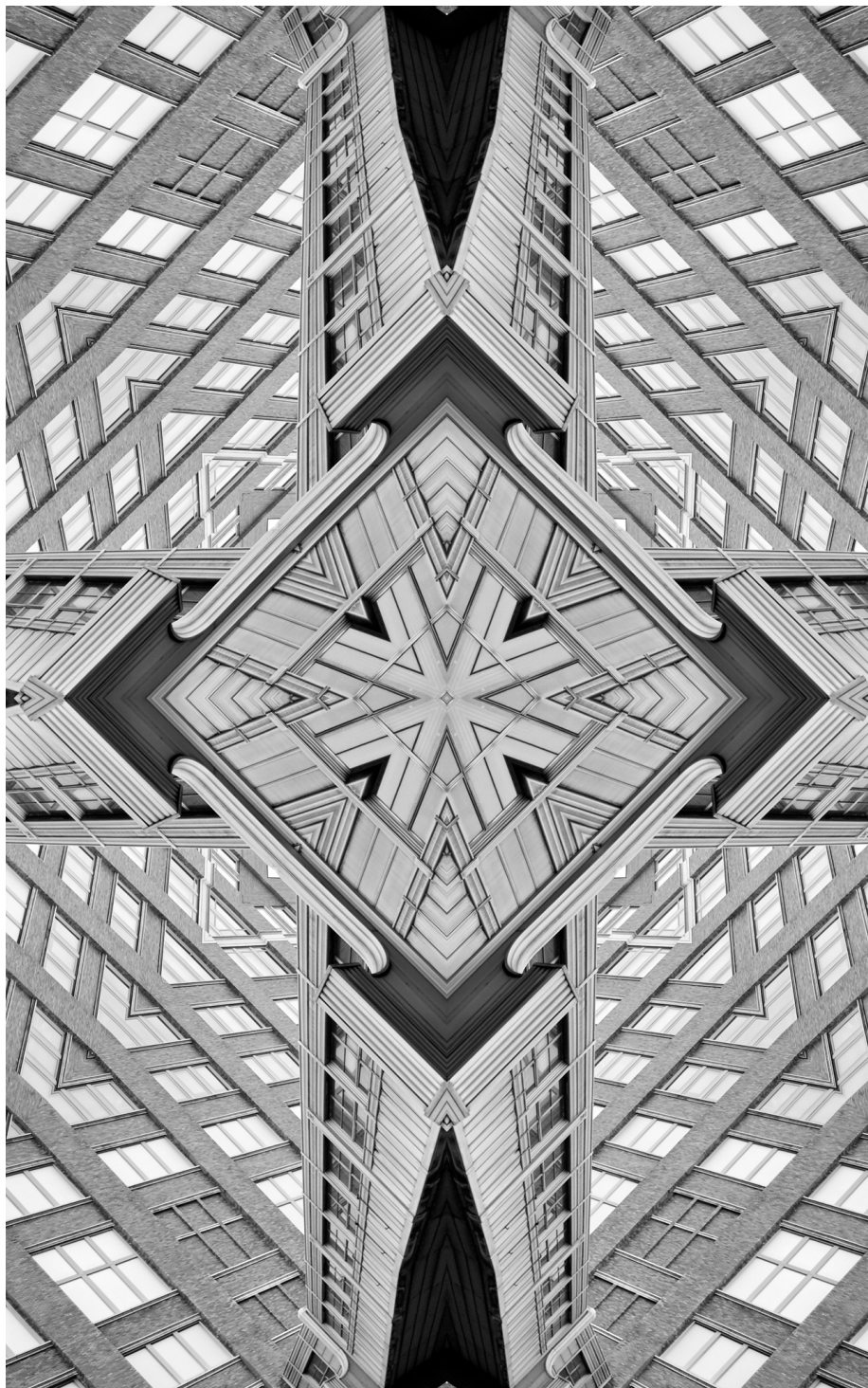
# Issue

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# Brief

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# Pathways to Food Self-Sufficiency in Africa

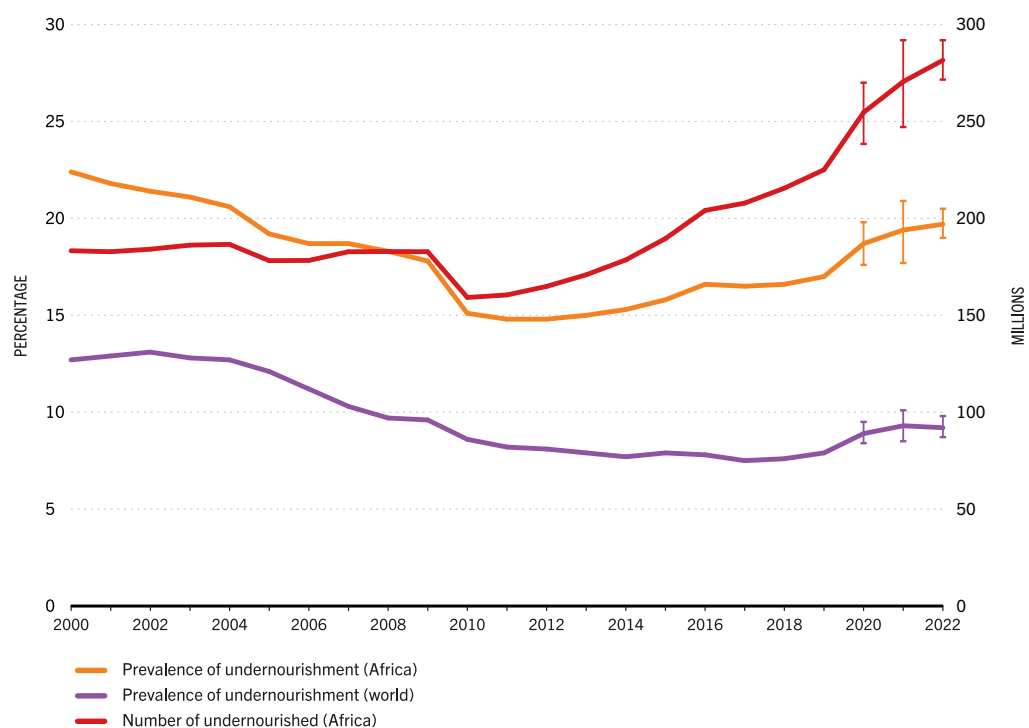
**Shoba Suri**

Africa is experiencing a food crisis on an unprecedented scale. More than 150 million people in the continent are anticipated to be in danger of increased levels of hunger in the immediate future because of the impacts of the conflict in Ukraine, compounded by climate-related variability and extremes, economic slowdowns, and the lingering consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within this context, social and gender disparities are increasing, with women and girls disproportionately impacted by these disruptions. This brief makes a case for supporting smallholder farmers, particularly women farmers, who have little access to finance, technology, and markets. It argues that having secure access to land and ensuring fairness in land rights is essential for boosting food production, and calls attention to the need for greater investments in climate-smart agriculture.

# Challenges to Food Security in Africa

Despite global attempts, Africa is not progressing as planned on achieving both, Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG 2, Zero Hunger) by 2030 and the Malabo Declaration for eradicating hunger and improving nutrition by 2025.<sup>1</sup> Most recent numbers indicate that around 282 million people in Africa (approximately 20 percent of the population) suffered from hunger in 2022, marking a rise of 57 million from before the COVID-19 pandemic. Following a 10-year period of improvement from 2000 to 2010, the level of hunger in Africa increased in the subsequent years, reaching 19.7 percent in 2022 from 15.1 percent in 2010 (Figure 1). As of 2022, Eastern Africa has the largest number of undernourished people in the continent, at 134.6 million; Western Africa has 62.8 million, Central Africa, 57 million, and Northern Africa, 7.5 million. In 2022 alone, some 868 million people in Africa experienced moderate to severe food insecurity, of which 342 million suffered severe food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> There is evidence that women are bearing the brunt of the worsening food insecurity patterns. During the pandemic, women in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, suffered more than men, experiencing loss of livelihood, income, and education.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1: Prevalence of Undernourishment in the World and Africa**

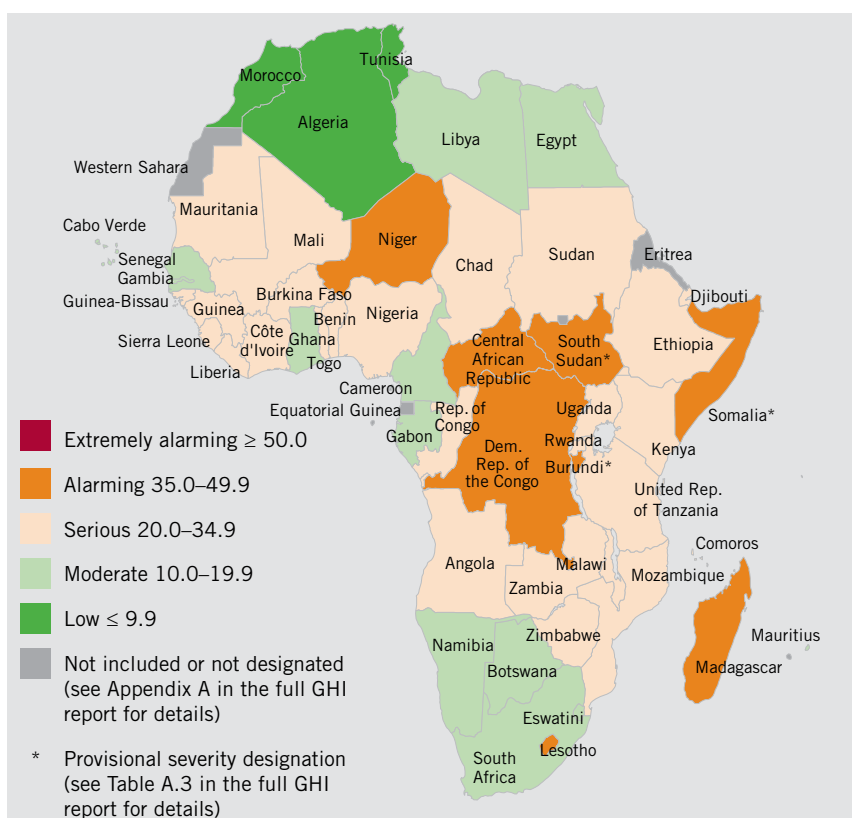


Source: FAO, AUC, ECA, and WFP (2023)<sup>4</sup>

# Challenges to Food Security in Africa

Globally, some 733 million people experienced hunger in 2023, or one out of every 11 people; in Africa, the number is one of every five.<sup>5</sup> The 2024 ministerial meeting of the G20 Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty cautioned that the world is severely lagging in achieving SDG 2 by 2030 by 15 years.<sup>6</sup> Regional patterns show differences: the percentage of people experiencing hunger is increasing in Africa (20.4 percent), whereas it is stagnant in Asia at 8.1 percent.<sup>7</sup> More than half of all people afflicted with hunger reside in these two regions. At the current rate, approximately 582 million individuals globally will suffer from chronic hunger by 2030, with half of them residing in Africa. Of the nine countries in the world that are experiencing alarming levels of hunger, eight are in Africa (i.e., Burundi, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Niger, Somalia, and South Sudan) (Figure 2).<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 2: Global Hunger Index - Africa**



Source: *Africa Brief, Global Hunger Index 2023*<sup>9</sup>

# Challenges to Food Security in Africa

The World Bank has reported that, from 2022 onwards, there was an annual increase in global food prices, mainly due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> Globally, the cost of an affordable meal was US\$3.96 for each individual per day. However, even with an increase in food prices, the overall percentage of unaffordability slightly rose from 26.7 percent to 26.9 percent, with Sub-Saharan Africa seeing an increase from 69.3 percent to 70.3 percent.<sup>11</sup>

Data from the Global Nutrition Targets 2030 indicates that Africa has made modest progress.<sup>12</sup> Stunting continues to affect millions of under-five children in the continent. In 2023, around 148 million children under the age of five were stunted, which accounted for 22.3 percent of all children globally. Central Africa has the highest burden, at 37.9 percent, followed by Eastern and Western Africa, which have similar regional averages at 30.6 percent and 30 percent, respectively. In 2022, wasting prevalence in Africa was 5.8 percent, below the global rate of 6.8 percent. Southern Africa had the lowest rates, at 3.5 percent; Western and Northern Africa were around the global average; and Eastern Africa had 5 percent. Despite making progress towards the World Health Assembly 2030 goal on child wasting, every sub-region was off-track, except for Western Africa, which experienced a reduction in the incidence of child wasting.

Meanwhile, the prevalence of overweight children under five in Africa was 4.9 percent in 2022, which was lower than the global average of 5.6 percent. In comparison to other subregions, the prevalence was higher in Northern Africa and Southern Africa, at 12.3 percent and 11.4 percent, respectively. This increase in overweight rates in Northern Africa has been evident since 2015, whereas Southern Africa has seen a decline in overweight rates.<sup>13</sup>

# Drivers of Food Insecurity in Africa

The rapid rise in food insecurity levels in Africa is driven by a combination of climate change, conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, and high costs of living.<sup>14</sup> Conflict exacerbates the effects of external shocks such as climate change, inflation, and the disruptions to global grain supplies resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In 2021, armed conflicts were witnessed in 18 countries in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>15</sup> As of 2023, an estimated 82 percent of Africans facing food insecurity resided in conflict-affected countries.<sup>16</sup> Evidence from Ethiopia and Malawi between 2011 and 2019 indicate a drastic reduction in food consumption score in populations exposed to conflict.<sup>17</sup>

The economic consequences of climate change, conflicts, and the pandemic have also increased inequality and widened social divides. Moscow's exit from the Black Sea Grain agreement—which allowed 33 million metric tons of grain to be exported to worldwide markets towards decreasing food costs, particularly in Africa—has worsened the food insecurity forecast.<sup>18</sup> El Niño climate patterns have previously led to reduced rainfall in Southern Africa, Western Africa, Sudan, and Ethiopia.<sup>19</sup> There is increased pressure to raise interest rates to combat rising inflation. However, this has led to higher borrowing costs and increased debt-servicing expenses, which are especially challenging for developing countries with limited financial resources. Furthermore, food and fuel imports will become expensive, which could result in households being forced to reduce their food consumption.

The inadequate infrastructure in Africa also poses challenges for the digitalisation of the agricultural sector.<sup>20</sup> Just as limited access to technology can pose obstacles to digital transformation, inadequate access to funds for integrating digital tools and technology in agriculture can hinder digital transformation.

# Boosting Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability

Agriculture plays a crucial role in the economies and societies of Africa. The continent relies heavily on smallholder farms, with an estimated 33 million such farms as of 2021, which are vital for both food production and livelihoods.<sup>21</sup>

Agricultural productivity in Africa has been on the rise, with an average annual increase of 13 percent between 2015 and 2020. During the same period, there was improvement in trade, as seen in the 26-percent decrease in Africa's agricultural trade deficit from 2015 to 2020 and the increased market share (from 10.3 in 2015 to 12 percent in 2020) worldwide, driven by processed agricultural products.<sup>22</sup>

However, in the majority of African nations, agriculture is still defined by small-scale, low-tech, rain-fed farming. Therefore, farmers and food production systems are extremely susceptible to climate-related, economic, and other shocks. Crop yields have been decreasing due to droughts, cyclones, and floods; some countries in East Africa are experiencing cross-border pest attacks such as desert locusts, as well as animal diseases.<sup>23</sup>

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on input and output markets has had a severe impact on African farmers, intensifying the difficulties faced by African families in purchasing essential food items. Furthermore, the limited mobility due to the pandemic caused disruptions in food supply chains, particularly in the connection between rural and urban areas, thus impacting food availability. The pandemic resulted in a 60-percent increase in the number of individuals experiencing hunger or malnutrition in Africa.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, the future outlook for African agriculture continues to be positive. A study from Sub-Saharan Africa emphasised that indigenous people commonly use climate-smart traditional farming techniques, such as applying organic manure and practicing mixed farming, to combat the impacts of climate change. These methods increase soil fertility and moisture retention while boosting crop productivity and resilience.<sup>25</sup> Supporting and assisting small-scale farmers also contributes to a varied and sustainable food system and decreases the reliance on imported products.<sup>26</sup>

As Africa undergoes rapid urbanisation, urban populations are seeking more and higher-quality food, which provides African smallholder farmers with the opportunities to grow their production for sale and boost their earnings. To leverage these opportunities, there is a need for investments in distribution systems, warehousing, cold storage, processing and packaging facilities, transport, energy, and water services.

# Empowering Farmers: Women, Youth, and Smallholders

Women in rural communities encounter multiple barriers to achieving success in the agriculture sector because of gender and power dynamics, restricted access to resources, technology, funding, and markets, and the disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities.<sup>27</sup> In order to change Africa's food systems, it is essential to empower women and young people. The African Union's Agenda 2063 and United Nations SDGs are aimed at achieving food security and gender equality in African agriculture.<sup>28</sup> This equality is crucial for ensuring fair compensation, reducing poverty, and addressing productivity gaps between male and female farmers in Africa.

Despite attempts to tackle these disparities and their consequences, there are multiple restricting laws, regulations, and policy frameworks still in place.<sup>29</sup> In many African countries, women in agriculture face disadvantages in agribusiness programmes, culture, and traditions. For example, in South Africa, women subsistence farmers have low output and poor economic status due to a lack of access to productive resources and extension services. Similarly, in Ghana, women farmers have limited access to credit, labour, and fertilisers.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, African women, particularly rural smallholder farmers, have restricted opportunities to use dependable financial and banking services. In Sub-Saharan Africa, in 2021, 49 percent of women had a bank account compared to 61.4 percent of men.<sup>31</sup> This gender gap of 12.3 percent is higher than the worldwide average of 4.4 percent.<sup>32</sup>

Research shows that improved access to financing helps small-scale farmers adopt sustainable agricultural methods, boost harvests, and expand income options, thereby supporting food security.<sup>33</sup> Having access to funding enables farmers to purchase better seeds, fertilisers, machinery, and technology, resulting in higher productivity. Additionally, inclusive policies, fair resource allocation, and financial assistance are crucial for addressing hunger and developing a sustainable agricultural system in Africa.<sup>34</sup>



# Policy, Investment, and Regional Cooperation

**H**aving secure access to land and ensuring fairness in land rights is essential for boosting food production, especially for disadvantaged communities. Countries that have implemented land reforms, such as Rwanda, have demonstrated that better land ownership rights lead to increased productivity.<sup>35</sup> National strategies targeting food security, such as social safety nets and nutrition-sensitive programmes,<sup>a</sup> have resulted in decreased hunger, as illustrated by Ethiopia's Productive Safety Nets Program (PSNP).<sup>b,36</sup> Trade liberalisation and measures that support trade within Africa can increase the availability and affordability of food, thus reducing food insecurity. For instance, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) promotes increased regional market integration through trade.<sup>37</sup> Collaboration among regions, such as AfCFTA and Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), helps in sharing knowledge, aligning policies, and enhancing cross-border food distribution.

Research from India and Bangladesh indicates that boosting public and private funding in agriculture, along with enhancing access to inputs, seeds, and technology, results in increased productivity and resilience.<sup>38,39</sup> Implementing advancements like climate-smart agriculture and digital tools has proven to enhance yields and resilience, particularly in areas prone to the consequences of climate change.<sup>40,41</sup>

Meeting the SDGs, especially the objective of Zero Hunger, requires funding in efficient, inclusive, and sustainable agricultural food systems. Yet, the obstacle of inadequate public investment in agriculture and food security persists. Global investment in agriculture has decreased in comparison to its impact on global production.<sup>42</sup> The Agriculture Orientation Index (AOI)<sup>c</sup> of the Food and Agriculture Organization, which assesses public funding in agriculture, decreased globally from 0.50 in 2015 to 0.45 in 2020, during the pandemic, and recovered to 0.48 in 2022.<sup>43</sup> In Africa, Northern Africa showed a marginal increase in AOI between 2015 and 2022, from 0.24 to 0.28. The AOI for Sub-Saharan Africa declined from 0.15 to 0.12 between 2015 and 2022.

a Initiatives that address the root causes of malnutrition and undernutrition.


b A social protection programme by the Government of Ethiopia targeting food-insecure households.

c The AOI measures the extent to which government expenditures in agriculture reflect (or not) the importance of agriculture in the overall mix of government outlays, and government contribution to the agriculture sector compared to the sector's contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

# Policy, Investment, and Regional Cooperation

However, increased agricultural investments alone will be insufficient to achieve SDG 2 in Africa; additional non-agricultural investments will be required. Climate change may result in an additional 16 million people facing the risk of hunger in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya alone.<sup>44</sup> In Africa's Sahel region, 55 million people are likely to experience food insecurity in 2024.<sup>45</sup> In Niger, 82 percent of the population is struggling with inadequate food consumption, with 1.9 million under-five children suffering from severe malnutrition.<sup>46</sup> A projected 25 million Nigerians face high risk of food insecurity, compared to the 2023 estimate of 17 million at risk.<sup>47</sup> Improved agricultural research and development could prevent hunger for 55 million people in Africa.<sup>48</sup>

With agriculture as the focus of Africa's strategy for economic development, the continent has the capacity to emerge as a leading global agricultural hub and a supplier of food products to other nations. The African Development Bank projects that Africa's food and agriculture market may grow to US\$1 trillion by 2030, up from US\$280 billion in 2023.<sup>49</sup> Agriculture in the continent relies on small-scale farmers who require better access to irrigation, technology, and assistance with storage and transportation. Small agricultural projects can benefit the community and, with the right support, provide sustainable financial opportunities. Changing Africa's food systems to accommodate climate change is no longer an option but an imperative, and requires the following:

- Prioritising investments in agriculture to enhance food security by providing resources for agriculture.
- Implementing more robust social safety nets, along with inclusive policy frameworks, to build a stronger food system that ensures lasting food security for all.
- Utilising adaptation and mitigation strategies to ensure that food systems are able to supply adequate nutritious food for everyone, despite the challenges presented by climate change.
- Increasing investments in climate-smart agriculture (and here, the role of governments, international organisations, and platforms such as the G20 will be crucial).
- Emphasising climate adaptation and peacebuilding for hunger amelioration.
- Making hunger and food self-sufficiency a political commitment for leaders across the continent as well as globally, in multilateral forums like the G20. 

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