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Global Food Security: Selected Multilateral Efforts

Congress may consider the role of multilateral institutions and initiatives in addressing record levels of global food insecurity. The United States, the largest government donor of international 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 (UN) 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.

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.*”

Background and Context

Global Food Security Crisis. A number of factors—human-induced and natural—have led to significant 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. Ukraine is a major exporter of cereal grains and sunflower oil, and the Russia-Ukraine war continues to have a global impact on food security. The conflict has disrupted global food supplies and contributed to higher food prices; food, fuel, and fertilizer shortages; and supply-chain delays. In 2024, the *World Food Program* (WFP) estimated that 343 million people worldwide in 74 countries suffered acute food insecurity, of which up to 1.9 million were estimated to be on the brink of famine, primarily in Gaza and Sudan. In the past year, as food needs increased and outpaced funding, WFP reported a 34% reduction in the number of people assisted and significant decreases in food and cash assistance globally.

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. Current activities are guided by the Global Food Security Act of 2016 (P.L. 114-195), which, among other things, states that it is in the U.S. national interest to promote global food security, resilience, and nutrition, and requires the executive branch to publish a Global Food Security Strategy (the most recent of which covers 2022-2026). The State Department’s Office of Global Food Security

develops and coordinates overall U.S. policy 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, nongovernmental organizations, and multilateral entities. U.S. food assistance includes in-kind U.S.-sourced commodities such as wheat or corn (which are subject to U.S. cargo preference requirements), locally and regionally procured foods, food vouchers, and cash transfers for food. U.S. funding also supports food security initiatives promoting agricultural productivity and nutrition.

Selected UN System Efforts

UN Food Agencies. The UN system plays a significant role in responding to food insecurity. The United States is the top financial contributor to several key UN food agencies.

The *World Food Program* is the largest global humanitarian agency, operating in over 120 countries, and has been American-led since 1992. It provides emergency and development food assistance, mainly in conflict and natural disaster situations. WFP is funded through voluntary contributions; it reported an operational requirement for calendar year 2024 of \$18 billion. U.S. funding for WFP in FY2023 totaled \$4.3 billion.

The *Food and Agriculture Organization* (FAO) is a UN 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 was assessed 22% (\$110.6 million in FY2023). U.S. voluntary funding in FY2023 was \$145.7 million.

The *International Fund for Agricultural Development* (IFAD) is an international financial institution and UN 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 2023, IFAD’s total project portfolio was \$8.1 billion. U.S. funding to IFAD in FY2023 was \$43 million.

Other Selected UN Activities. The United Nations has also addressed food security and global hunger through *high-level global meetings* that include governments, UN entities, and civil society. The first meeting to address

global food crises was the World Food Conference held in 1974 in Rome, Italy. More recently, a UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) was held as part of a UN General Assembly session in 2021; the next summit is scheduled for 2025. Several *international agreements* have provided frameworks for multilateral food aid commitments and coordination, including the 2013 Food Assistance Convention. UN members have also established several *coordinating mechanisms*. For example, in 1974, the UN 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 UN humanitarian food security responses. More recently, in March 2022, the UN 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 war.

Other Global Initiatives and Tools

Selected Initiatives. A range of complementary (and at times overlapping) global food security mechanisms and commitments exist outside the UN system. Some include or work with UN 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 European Union (EU), FAO, and WFP in 2016 to examine the root causes of food crises and share best practices; and
- the *Global Agriculture and Food Security Program* was established in 2010 by the Group of 20 to support 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 UN Global Food Security Ministerial Meeting; over 100 countries agreed to a “Roadmap for Global Food Security.” The United States also played a lead role in the adoption 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 USAID-funded *Famine Early Warning Systems Network*, which provides evidence-based analysis to inform humanitarian planning, 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 for improved 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 UN Entities. Congress may monitor executive branch policies and priorities in UN fora related to food security, including U.S. participation in the governance structures of WFP, FAO, IFAD, and other UN bodies. More broadly, Members may consider how to most effectively coordinate U.S. bilateral commitments with multilateral activities. Congress may also examine the effectiveness of vetting procedures and monitoring mechanisms used by multilateral implementors for oversight of food assistance as well as the systems in place to respond to aid diversion and other fraudulent activities (such as 2023 events in Ethiopia).

U.S. Funding. Members may consider how to most effectively track U.S. funding to UN 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 typically 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.

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