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Measuring the commitment to reduce hunger: A hunger reduction commitment index

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ABSTRACT

Can an index be constructed to assess governments' commitment to reduce hunger? This paper argues for the need for such an index and outlines one way of constructing it. We use secondary data to construct the Hunger Reduction Commitment Index (HRCI) for 21 developing countries.

We operationalise commitment around 3 themes: legal frameworks, policies and programmes and government expenditures, to find Malawi, the Gambia, Guatemala, Brazil and Senegal heading the list, with China, Nepal, Lesotho, Zambia and Guinea Bissau coming bottom. Rankings were robust to our choices about weighting and ranking methods.

The paper demonstrates a viable method to measure political commitment and highlights the analytical importance of disentangling hunger commitment from hunger outcomes. Cross-tabulations of HRCI scores with hunger, wealth, administrative capacity and voice and accountability scores can guide action from different stakeholders (governments, civil society, donors). Finally, we show how primary data collection might be used to assess areas of strength and weakness in country specific commitments to reduce hunger.

Introduction[1]

> *Addressing hunger. . . ultimately is a matter of political priorities. At a global level there is no independent body which audits the implementation of these commitments. Neither is there an independent authority with the power and willingness to name and shame those who have not lived up to their promises*
>
> (Hunger Task Force, 2008, p. 23)

Can an index be constructed to assess the commitment to reduce hunger and will it achieve anything positive? This paper argues for the need for such an index and outlines one way of constructing it. We use secondary data to construct such an index for 21 countries where hunger remains a major problem, comparing the hunger reduction commitment index with hunger outcomes. The paper then provides some examples of how primary data collection might be used to assess country specific commitment to reduce hunger. Finally, the paper outlines how the index might be evaluated against its theory of change.

Why did the Irish Hunger Task Force call for a way of assessing commitments? First, levels of hunger remain very high, hovering at 870 million for the past 5 years (FAO, 2012). Given levels of aggregate prosperity, unprecedented access to technology, information and know-how, this suggests that lack of political commitment is a factor in high and persistent hunger rates. A measure of the commitment to reduce hunger will help to focus support and pressure for change. Second, the measurement of outcomes alone is not a sufficiently strong accountability mechanism, largely because attribution is difficult (there are many factors contributing to hunger reduction, many of which Governments cannot control) and because of a lack of transparency (we don't actually know what Governments are doing to address the situation). When the outcomes trend positively Governments can claim credit (perhaps falsely) and when they trend badly, Governments get the blame (perhaps unfairly). We need to be able to track a Government's commitment.

What does the measurement of commitment result in? How might its measurement change anything? The theory of change behind the existence of a HRCI is that (a) a HRCI will measure commitment credibly and this will strengthen our ability to hold Governments to account for their efforts in reducing hunger, (b) if civil society is better able to hold Governments to account in terms of their effort to reduce hunger, then it can apply pressure and ensure that hunger is not neglected and keep it higher on the development agenda, (c) Governments can hold themselves

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to account in their efforts to keep hunger high on the agenda. Such an index can help them to track and prioritise their efforts because the index is constructed on the basis of performance in different areas (legal, policy and expenditure) and (d) commitment can be linked to outcomes, to allow all to assess the 'value added' of different commitments and effort. This paper describes a procedure for constructing an index and outlines ways to test this theory of change.

Are there precedents for the construction of such a commitment index? At the macro level, the Center for Global Development constructs an annual "commitment to development" index for donor countries which assesses their commitments to development across performance in a range of sectors (aid, trade, migration, environment, investment, support for the creation and dissemination of next technologies, and security).[2] This index is widely used by ONE.org and other organisations to mobilise support for development in the host countries. At the more micro level Freedom House's Freedom in the World[3] indicators of the extent to which civil and political freedoms are respected, protected and fulfilled are widely used to pressure and support Governments throughout the world to be more open, inclusive and equitable.

Moreover, various hunger indices exist, with distinct qualities and weaknesses (for a review, see: Masset, 2011). The closest comparators to the HRCI are Action Aid's Hunger Free Scorecard (Action Aid, 2009, 2010), which combines hunger outcomes with hunger expenditures and other indicators of commitment, and the Global Food Security Index (EIU, 2012). These indices conflate outcomes and commitment; this is problematic because Governments contribute to, but do not have total control over outcomes. In addition, we believe more insight is generated into commitment if commitment per se is set against levels and progress in outcomes.

The other key index in the hunger area is the Global Hunger Index[4] from IFPRI, Concern International and German AgroAction. It combines FAO's hunger indicator, the percent of the population below an "undernourishment" index (based on food supply) with the percent of children under 5 that have low weight for age and under five mortality rates.[5] It has quickly become an influential indicator, being cited in many places. Nevertheless, it remains an outcome indicator, one that Governments cannot control.

Conceptualising the political commitment to reduce hunger

How then to conceptualise commitment in a way that facilitates its measurement? The literature highlights that 'political will' is frequently equated with 'political commitment' and so we use these terms interchangeably. Both concepts are characterised by vagueness and little analytic content, yet routinely used in a catch all manner (Thomas and Grindle, 1990, p. 1164), often applying a *post hoc* circular logic (Brinkerhoff, 2000). Indeed, for some, political will is the "slipperiest concept in the policy lexicon" (Hammergren, 1998, p. 12). We were unable to identify analytical efforts that measured or systematically compared political commitment/will across or within countries, or between state and non-state actors.

Building on Brinkerhoff (2000), political commitment can be broken down into components of action and intention. Intention is driven by ownership and capacity because political commitment has a latent quality. Even in the absence of action, there may be a residual element of intention, which may not necessarily be visible or tangible. For instance, decision makers' assessments of their capacity to implement new policies, and their assessment of the strength of opposition to it will influence their a priori willingness to make commitments (Morrissey and Verschoor, 2006 in Brinkerhoff, 2007). Thus, "if capability is limited and opposition relatively strong [...] governments may not wish to declare their intent-they may be committed, but will not wish to risk failure by declaring ownership" (Morrissey, 1995, p. 640).

The difficulty of identifying and measuring intention leads us to focus analysis on elements of action. We thus only consider the **actions** of governments in their pursuit of hunger reduction. One way of thinking about this is to consider what governments say, what they do, and what they do not do (The Policy Project, 2000). Others note that political commitment can be *expressed* by influential political leaders (verbal declarations of support for an issue); *institutionalised* (in policies, organisational infrastructure and laws in support of an issue); and take the shape of *budgetary commitment* (earmarked allocations of resources towards a specific issue) (Reich and Balarajan, 2012). Public statements by political or bureaucratic leaders suggest a level of volition, and are potentially measurable,[6] but statements without consequent concrete action may be merely symbolic. Actions of particular interest concern sustained material, legal and financial efforts (The Policy Project, 2000). Consequently, we identify three domains or themes under which government action is compared across a selected group of developing countries: (a) Policies and programmes, (b) Legal frameworks and (c) Public expenditures. For each theme, we identify several indicators for which secondary (existing) data can be used to measure political commitment.

How do we apply these themes to hunger? We choose to relate the index to the term hunger because hunger resonates with non-experts, and the index is designed to help those who want to motivate non-experts to put pressure on their governments to act. Nevertheless, hunger and food insecurity are not the same thing (Foresight 2011). For example an individual can be food insecure but not hungry because the quality of their diet is poor, but the bulk is sufficient to satiate. Our index is geared in a technical sense to three dimensions of food insecurity: food availability, food access and food utilisation. We elaborate further on the mapping of policies and programmes, legislation and spending to these three dimensions in Building the HRCI when we justify the choice of indicators (see Table 3).

Relying solely on secondary data to assess commitment has limitations. First, we do not really know what is happening on the ground. Countries can improve their index rankings by merely committing to policies, programmes and laws on paper, while failing to implement them. Second, while the between country rankings will be important for some advocacy and accountability activities, each country will have different set of country–specific resources to underpin commitment and it is important to track these. Finally, the collection of the data itself has the potential to be an important advocacy tool in its own right, raising consciousness and initiating dialogues. The exclusive use of existing data to construct the indices means that this opportunity is lost.

Accordingly we have designed an instrument to capture primary data related to commitment, an instrument that can be adapted to each country's circumstances. The primary data will help control for country circumstances, and the process of engagement with in country experts has potential to inspire networking and action to enhance political commitment to hunger reduction in a country.

[2] http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/1424561.
[3] http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=594.
[4] http://www.ifpri.org/publication/2010-global-hunger-index.
[5] Similarly, the Hidden Hunger index assesses vitamin and mineral deficiency levels and Disability Adjusted Life Years attributed to these (Muthayya et al., 2013).
[6] A collection of public statements could for instance be subjected to content analysis.