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Equate and Conflate: Political Commitment to Hunger and Undernutrition Reduction in Five High-Burden Countries

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Summary. — As political commitment is an essential ingredient for elevating food and nutrition security onto policy agendas, commitment metrics have proliferated. Many conflate government commitment to fight hunger with combating undernutrition. We test the hypothesis that commitment to hunger reduction is empirically different from commitment to reducing undernutrition through expert surveys in five high-burden countries: Bangladesh, Malawi, Nepal, Tanzania, and Zambia. Our findings confirm the hypothesis. We conclude that sensitive commitment metrics are needed to guide government and donor policies and programmatic action. Without, historically inadequate prioritization of non-food aspects of malnutrition may persist to imperil achieving global nutrition targets.
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Key words — political commitment, hunger, nutrition, food security, nutrition security

1. INTRODUCTION

> *There are many reasons for insufficient progress in reducing hunger and undernutrition. One of these is a "lack of political will" or political prioritisation.*
>
> [Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 2012, p. 22.]

In recent years, the global hunger and nutrition community has increasingly come to view political commitment as an essential ingredient for pushing food and nutrition security higher up public policy agendas (FAO, IFAD, & WFP, 2013, 2014; Foresight, 2011; Gillespie, Haddad, Mannar, Menon, & Nisbett, 2013; IFPRI, 2014; te Lintelo, Haddad, Leavy, & Lakshman, 2014; te Lintelo, Haddad, Leavy, Masset, & Stanley, 2011). In response, commitment metrics and scorecard tools to assess levels of political commitment have proliferated. They enhance accountability of governments, donors, civil society, and the private sector organizations for actions addressing hunger and nutrition. International organizations and aid donors also use these tools to make decisions on funding and programmatic action. Examples of these metrics include the World Health Organization's (WHO) nutrition landscape analyses (Engesveen, Nishida, Prudhon, & Shrimpton, 2009), the Hunger Free scorecard (ActionAid, 2009, 2010), the Hunger Reduction Commitment Index (te Lintelo, Haddad, Lakshman, & Gatellier, 2014; te Lintelo *et al.*, 2011); the Nutrition Barometer (Save the Children & World Vision International, 2012); the Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index (te Lintelo, Haddad, Lakshman, & Gatellier, 2013, 2014); the Political Commitment Rapid Assessment Tool (Fox, Balarajan, Cheng, & Reich, 2015) and the Global Nutrition Report's review of Nutrition 4 Growth Summit commitments (IFPRI, 2014).

These metrics have focused on operationalizing the concept of political commitment to enable its measurement. Yet many inadvertently conflate commitment to address food security with commitment to tackle nutrition security; and commitment to fight hunger with commitment to combat undernutrition. This conflation is also common in the policy and academic literature (World Bank, 2006) and in dominant narratives on nutrition in development (Nisbett, Gillespie, Haddad, & Harris, 2014). Because the concepts of food security and nutrition security are only partially overlapping, we hypothesize that government commitment to hunger reduction is empirically different from government commitment to reducing undernutrition. This study accordingly builds on research that has used secondary data to demonstrate that developing countries often have divergent strengths of commitment to hunger reduction and to nutrition (te Lintelo, Haddad, Lakshman *et al.*, 2014; te Lintelo *et al.*, 2013). We review the literature to synthesize a set of nine political commitment indicators; construct a survey instrument; and collect primary data in five high-burden countries (Bangladesh, Malawi, Nepal, Tanzania, and Zambia) to ascertain whether government commitment to hunger is the same as commitment to nutrition.

We present two key findings. Firstly, our evidence shows that hunger and nutrition commitment are not the same. Empirically, hunger reduction commitment exceeds nutrition commitment in Malawi, Bangladesh, Tanzania, and Zambia, and the reverse is the case in Nepal. We thus affirm our hypothesis that government commitment to hunger reduction does not equate with commitment to nutrition. This matters because metrics that conflate hunger and undernutrition risk misinforming government and donor policy and maintain historically inadequate prioritization of non-food aspects of malnutrition (Heaver, 2005). This in turn imperils achieving key global or regional nutrition targets on stunting such as set out in the African Union Malabo Declaration 2014 (to achieve 10% stunting levels by 2025), or by the World Health Assembly (a 40% reduction of the global number of stunted children

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under five by 2025). We hence conclude that commitment metrics, which are gaining in popularity, must be sensitive to these differences in order to better guide public policy and programmatic action.

Our second main finding is that the survey instrument developed for this study is sufficiently sensitive to record divergent performances on nine commitment indicators within each country. Accordingly the instrument could have diagnostic value in assisting donors, civil society leaders, and nutrition champions to assess in which areas commitment is in need of strengthening, and in which areas further strengthening may not be a priority. We discuss what kind of intervention strategy could improve nutrition commitment.

Following this introduction, Section 2 provides a brief overview of the current status of hunger and undernutrition as global development problems and discusses some important conceptual differences that need to be reflected in political commitment metrics. This is followed in Section 3 by a synthesis of the literature to identify nine key political commitment indicators that inform the research instrument employed in this study. Section 4 presents the research methodology and the research instrument. Section 5 presents findings, followed by a discussion (Section 6) and conclusions (Section 7).

2. HUNGER AND UNDERNUTRITION AS A GLOBAL PROBLEM

Hunger and undernutrition are among the most persistent global development challenges. Global numbers of undernourished people remain very high despite some improvements since the 1990s (Black *et al.*, 2013). In 2012–14, 805 million people (around one in eight people in the world) were estimated to be suffering from chronic hunger and regularly not getting enough food to conduct an active life (FAO, IFAD, & WFP, 2013). Just as there are multiple manifestations of hunger and undernutrition, so there are a number of different anthropometric measures, the most common of which are stunting (a measure of chronic undernutrition), wasting (acute undernutrition), and underweight (an amalgam of the two). Globally, one quarter of children aged under five are stunted (an estimated 162 million in 2012); 15% are underweight; and 8% are wasted (UNICEF, 2014). At regional level these statistics can be even more alarming. Many countries in Africa still report high or very high child stunting prevalence rates, of 30% or more. The worst-affected countries are concentrated in Eastern Africa and the Sahel. A few countries in South Asia also report stunting rates of up to 50% (FAO, IFAD, & WFP, 2013). The rate of stunting among children under five in South Asia is a staggering 32%, while one in six (16%) children in the region suffer from wasting (UNICEF, 2014). In 2012, nearly 70% of the world's wasted children lived in Asia and the condition exposes these children to a markedly increased risk of death. Globally, undernutrition contributed to 45%, or 3.1 million deaths, of children under five in 2011 (Black *et al.*, 2013), and is both a manifestation and an intergenerational driving mechanism of poverty (Nisbett *et al.*, 2014).

Notwithstanding the routine measurement of hunger and nutrition outcomes by governments and international organizations, definitions, conceptual explication, and accompanying measurement instruments for key terms have rarely been static over the last three decades (CFS, 2012; FAO, IFAD, & WFP, 2013, 2014; Foresight, 2011; Jarosz, 2011). This can be illustrated by comparison of two leading analytical reports on hunger and undernutrition: the synthesis report on Ending Hunger of the Foresight Project on Global Food and Farming Futures (2011) and FAO, IFAD, and WFP's (2014) annual State of Food Insecurity report. Foresight (2011) offers a subtle analysis of the overlapping nature of hunger, food insecurity, and undernutrition. It shows that hunger may occur in the presence as well as in the absence of undernutrition. Likewise, undernutrition may occur without people suffering from chronic hunger. Tellingly, neither report offers a definition of hunger, similar conceptualizations of undernutrition,[1] and subtly different conceptualisations of food insecurity. FAO defines food insecurity as "A situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life" (FAO, IFAD, & WFP, 2014, p. 50). Here, food insecurity entails a realized outcome. In contrast, Foresight posits food insecurity both as an actual as well as a *potential* outcome by including situations where people have "sufficient access to food today, but [are] at risk of loss in the future" (Foresight, 2011, pp. 3–4).

Furthermore, Foresight (2011, p. 4) notes that while "there is no specific measure of hunger" it "tends to be equated with FAO's "undernourishment" measure", which itself is used as an indicator for food insecurity. Indeed, the FAO report specifically considers hunger as "being synonymous with chronic undernourishment", which is "a state, lasting for at least one year, of inability to acquire enough food, defined as a level of food intake insufficient to meet dietary energy requirements" (FAO, IFAD, & WFP, 2014, p.50).

Despite the above, there is at least basic agreement about the distinction between food security and nutrition security. As nutrition has risen up international development agendas over the last decade, thanks to major efforts by, among others, the *Lancet Series* (Bhutta *et al.*, 2008), the Scaling Up Nutrition movement and the recent Global Nutrition Report (IFPRI, 2014), a consensus has emerged that (actualized) food insecurity and hunger have food-based causes, whereas undernutrition is driven by food as well as non-food causes, including care, hygiene, and health (e.g., CFS, 2011; FAO, IFAD, & WFP, 2014; World Bank, 2006).[2] Accordingly, FAO has adopted the concept of nutrition security that includes but "differs from food security in that it also considers the aspects of adequate caring practices, health, and hygiene in addition to dietary adequacy" (FAO, IFAD, & WFP, 2014, p.50).

Critically, the common distinction between food and non-food causes enables this paper to investigate whether commitment to tackling hunger (as an outcome of food causes) equates to the commitment to addressing nutrition (as an outcome of food and non-food causes). In order to do so, the next section explores the concept of political commitment.

3. OPERATIONALIZING POLITICAL COMMITMENT

"Political commitment" is often considered synonymous with "political will" [3]and has been part of mainstream development policy discourses for at least two decades. Debates in the 1990s and early 2000s considered political commitment "development's latest holy grail" (McCourt, 2003, p. 1015) and a key factor in explaining the outcomes of governance (e.g., Brinkerhoff, 2000) and macroeconomic reforms (e.g., McCourt, 2003; Morrissey, 1995). Responses to the 2007–08 global food price crisis also highlighted the role of political commitment. The Irish Hunger Task Force. (2008, p. 23) noted: "Addressing hunger... ultimately is a matter of political priorities", and FAO (2012) identified political commit-

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