



Re-Engaging Americans in the Search for Lasting Solutions

Sarah Burd-Sharps and Kristen Lewis, Social Science Research Council

Fresno County, California, leads the nation in agricultural productivity, with an annual agricultural output valued at \$6.8 billion. Fresno farms yield a cornucopia of fresh food, producing more grapes, chicken, turkey, milk, tomatoes, peaches, plums, and almonds—among others—than any other U.S. county. Paradoxically, Fresno also has a higher rate of food insecurity than any other California county. One in five residents—more than 190,000 people—experience times when they don't have enough food for an active, healthy life.¹ There's no better illustration that hunger in the United States is not due to a lack of food than Fresno, a county whose workers literally feed America, yet often cannot feed themselves.

The presence of hunger amid plenty is profoundly troubling, its persistence even more so. If we're being honest with ourselves, while the composition of the hungry population has certainly shifted over time, we have failed to move the needle on this issue in any fundamental way for more than a decade. U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics show household food insecurity hovering just under 12 percent from 1998 to 2007, after which it rose above 14 percent in the aftermath of the Great Recession. The household food insecurity rate in 2012 was 14.5 percent, which translates to nearly 49 million Americans.²

The puzzling part is that this problem endures despite excellent research about the root causes of food insecurity, years of advocacy, important policy reforms, innovative programs on the ground to feed people, the dedica-

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tion of myriad volunteers, and significant financial resources. Collectively, the government and private organizations spent about \$115 billion fighting hunger in 2011. That's \$315 million—about \$330 for each hungry family—every single day.

There's so much first-rate work being done to understand and address hunger in America,

and the richest country in the world certainly lacks neither money nor food. We need to figure out how to pull this work together such that it equals more than the sum of its parts.

Measure of America's aim is to rethink the ways in which we as a society understand and measure disadvantage, with a view to reframing the debate and re-engaging Americans in the search for lasting solutions. One way we do this is by using numbers to tell the story of what's going on with everyday Americans. *Measure of America's* American Human Development Index is the cornerstone of this work. Another is to highlight what's working, not just in the



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

The Millennium Summit at the United Nations in 2000, when and where the Millennium Development Goals were launched. Tarja Halonen, president of Finland and co-chair of the Millennium Summit, addresses the assembly.

United States but also around the world, to improve well-being and expand opportunity.

In September 2000, leaders from 189 countries met at the United Nations and agreed to work jointly toward eight measurable, time-bound goals to reduce global poverty—goals such as halving the percentage of people who are undernourished, reaching 100 percent elementary school enrollment, and providing access to HIV/AIDS treatment for everyone who needs it. They were called the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The MDG rallying cry did not, of course, solve all of the world's problems, but it spurred tremendous action and results. The global target to cut the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by half was reached ahead of the 2015 deadline, as were goals on access to safe water, fewer malaria deaths, and better living conditions for slum dwellers. In addition, the world is on track to meet the hunger and tuberculosis targets.

The MDGs were remarkably powerful and successful for many reasons. They helped focus governments and NGOs on achieving a limited set of clear objectives in areas that were central to human well-being, and they made it hard for those who preferred to look the other way to continue denying the existence of severe human deprivation. They galvanized collaboration and brought home the realization that duplication and competition among similar organizations would not get the world across the finish line. They created a more predictable environment in which recipient governments and NGOs weren't pulled this way and that by constantly shifting donor priorities, making longer-term planning and programming possible. And most importantly, the MDG process put in place a system of

accountability in which progress toward the goals was tracked annually and communicated widely. This regular, accessible reporting put persistent divides, such as those between rural and urban areas and between the very poorest and everyone else, into bold relief. The shift from measuring *inputs* (we lent \$2 million, we installed fifty wells, we trained one hundred teachers) to measuring *outputs* (50 percent fewer people dying of malaria, twice as many girls enrolled in secondary school, half as many people drinking unsafe water) meant that *investments had to yield tangible results to count as progress*.

The eighth goal involved raising the money to pay for this progress. The flow of foreign aid had dwindled during the 1990s, and the international consensus around the ambitious MDG targets provided a shot in the arm for development assistance. Total development aid went from \$79 billion in 2004 to almost \$129 billion in 2010 (in constant 2009 dollars).³ Though that sum fell short of what some had hoped for, and funds slowed after the global recession, such an increase had been unthinkable in the business-as-usual scenario.

The MDGs encouraged a wide range of actors to pull in the same direction and provided a clear measure of success. Could those in the United States working to reduce hunger and food insecurity commit to a small set of widely-agreed outcomes—within a set time period—that would focus efforts, increase collaboration, and maybe even stimulate some healthy competition in an area where today too many Americans are paying too little attention? We think it's worth a try.

Sarah Burd-Sharps and Kristen Lewis are co-directors of Measure of America, a project of the Social Science Research Council, and authors of the book series of the same name. The most recent edition of Measure of America was released in June 2013.

Figure c.1 **Progress Depends on How You Look at Things**



Source: Social Science Research Council