



CHAPTER 4: ADVANCING EQUITY FOR WORKERS IN FOOD SYSTEMS

“Leave no one behind,” a pillar of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) approach, means what it says: the world cannot achieve goals such as ending hunger unless everyone is included. To end hunger and malnutrition everywhere requires tackling their root causes. Unfortunately, one of these root causes, and the reason some people are far more likely to suffer from hunger or malnutrition than others, is simply that all over the world, humanity has created social structures that value some people more than others. There are large disparities in hunger rates based on gender, race, class, and other categories that reflect people’s status in their societies.

Social exclusion is a multidimensional phenomenon with a long history. Earlier chapters have discussed some of the major equity issues in context, ranging from the enormous capital investments needed in U.S. agriculture that prevent would-be new farmers from getting started, to children from poor families in low-income countries being forced to leave school at 12 or 13 to get married or work. In this chapter, we will stick to the theme of food systems woven through the report. Power is inequitably distributed among workers in food systems. Most of the people who plant, grow, harvest, pack, process, and serve the food consumed around the world do not earn enough to meet their own basic nutritional needs. These are among the lowest-paying jobs in any country.

In low- and middle-income countries, one in three workers are employed in agriculture.¹ In the poorest nations, this is as much as 80 percent of the workforce. Smallholder farm households are home to the largest number of people on Earth who live in extreme poverty.² In the United States, the

food system is the largest sector of employment for low-wage workers. They work as restaurant servers, dishwashers, and cooks, counter workers in fast food settings, and seasonal farmworkers.³

The important message of the SDGs is to work on specific problems, while keeping in mind their place in the larger picture and emphasizing the necessity of coordinated action across sectors in order to address all facets of the problem. This chapter discusses gender discrimination, which is near-universal on Earth and impacts most other equity problems; racial inequities, particularly in the United States; and some of the particular forms of bias against Indigenous people, undocumented workers, and child laborers.

The Female Face of Food Systems

Women shape the food system as producers and consumers, performing most of the food-related work in the workforce and at home. In all countries, women on average do not earn as much as men for doing the same paid work. Gender inequities are just as prevalent in the home. Compared to fathers, mothers spend more hours on unpaid household chores and childcare.

Producers

Land is a precious asset to farmers everywhere. Land ownership provides collateral to gain access to credit and loans to invest in their farm enterprise. In low- and middle-income countries, where most people farm to earn a living, women do not have equal rights to own land.⁴ A 2011 report on women in agriculture by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Ensure all food-system workers fair pay and decent work conditions.
- Build food systems free of gender and racial inequities by enforcing equal protections under the law or by modifying laws to ensure equal protection.
- Empower Indigenous populations so that they can maintain control over their lands and protect traditional food systems.
- Protect workers, regardless of their immigration status, from forced labor and other abuses in food supply chains.
- Address root causes of child labor in agriculture by ending rural hunger and poverty and guaranteeing every child free access to education.

concluded that closing the gender gap in access to land and other productive resources could lift as many as 150 million people out of hunger.⁵

It is notable that countries with the highest child malnutrition rates remain the furthest behind in reducing gender inequalities. A woman's ability to earn income is directly related to her purchasing power and thus ability to improve dietary diversity at home. Research shows that women dedicate a larger share of their own income than men to nourishing their family.⁶ That is why investments in maternal and child nutrition decoupled from women's economic empowerment are bound to yield diminishing returns.

It takes much longer to prepare a diverse and safe diet if a woman has little support from others in the household. In India, where maternal and child malnutrition rates are among the highest in the world (See [Chapter 2: Aligning Health Systems](#)), women spend an average of five hours per day on childcare and domestic chores, while men spend only 52 minutes.⁷ Similar disparities are common around the world and often the result of entrenched cultural attitudes about gender roles. It is not easy to legislate cultural change. In

2013, India's National Food Security Act was adopted, which included, among other provisions, modest cash grants for pregnant and lactating women. The intent was to make clear that maternal nutrition is a national investment and worth sacrificing women's labor output. But most of the women eligible for the grant never received it.⁸

In the poorest countries, agriculture is the sector that provides the majority of women's income. Tools such as the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), developed by USAID and private sector partners, enable donors, governments, and communities to make realistic assessments of local women's agency in their work as farmers. Agricultural development workers can plan and adapt programs to achieve more equitable outcomes.

Recent studies demonstrate that well designed nutrition-sensitive agricultural programs can improve dietary diversity and the nutritional status of children in the household.⁹ Nutrition-sensitive simply means using any pathway, not just traditional nutrition programs, to improve people's nutrition. In rural areas, agriculture is an ideal sector for action on nutrition. For example, a program that supports women

BOX 2.1

KEY CONCEPTS IN THIS CHAPTER

Equity/inequity

"[Equity is] the absence of avoidable or remediable differences among groups of people, whether those groups are defined socially, economically, demographically, or geographically." (WHO)

"Inequity, which can be defined as 'unfairness of opportunity,' and the resulting inequalities (defined as differences and disparities in an individual's living conditions) play a significant role in the deterioration we have seen on the nutritional front." (UNSCN, p. 15)

Forced labor

"Situations in which persons are coerced to work through the use of violence or intimidation or by more subtle means such as accumulated debt, retention of identity papers, or threats of denunciation to immigration authorities." (ILO)

Indigenous

"Communities, peoples, and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories or parts of them. They form, at present, non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions, and legal system." (UN Study of the Problem of Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations, par. 379)

Structural racism

"A system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various,

often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with 'whiteness' and disadvantages associated with 'color' to endure and adapt over time. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead it has been a feature of the social, economic, and political systems in which we all exist." (The Aspen Institute)

Women's empowerment

"Empowering women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors is essential to build stronger economies, achieve internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability, and improve the quality of life for women, men, families, and communities. The private sector is a key partner in efforts to advance gender equality and empower women." (UN Women)

in homestead food production could include a special focus on how to identify, grow, and prepare nutrient-rich foods; it could include educating pregnant and lactating women about breastfeeding and the introduction of complementary foods.

Experience has shown that when it comes to ensuring gender equity, good intentions are not enough. If local law, program policies, or other governing rules do not require a set of specific questions or a methodology that identify barriers and potential barriers to women's equitable participation in supply chains, men are very likely to benefit disproportionately. By the time this becomes evident, the causes may be difficult to distinguish.

Earlier we discussed linking smallholder farmers to school meal programs ([See Chapter 2: Aligning Education Systems](#)). Nearly every country in the world has a national school feeding program to improve child nutrition,¹⁰ so it is a natural place to ensure that female producers can participate fairly. Procurement policies could require purchasing a specified amount of the food from women or woman-owned businesses. Nigeria's school feeding program includes such a provision, and it provides tens of thousands of female smallholder farmers with a market for their eggs, farmed fish, legumes, and vegetables.¹¹ School feeding programs have been successful in narrowing gender gaps in school enrollment and attendance rates, and they can contribute to closing gender gaps in agriculture as well.

Additional material

See Bread for the World Institute's 2015 Hunger Report [When Women Flourish... We Can End Hunger](#).

Servers

In the United States, as in other high-income countries, the percentage of the workforce who are farmers is quite small, and women are a much smaller share of the nation's farmers than men. Most women employed in the U.S. food system are in the lowest-paying jobs, which are in the service sector. A 2013 study by the University of California at Berkeley found that front-line fast food workers had the highest rate of participation of any occupation in federal programs such as SNAP, Medicaid, or other safety net programs. More than 70 percent of these workers, who qualified for federal assistance due to their low wages, were women.¹²

The restaurant industry has experienced rapid growth over the past decade, and so have its profits. This trend is expected to continue.¹³ The benefits of growth have not trickled down to most workers in the form of higher wages. The federal minimum wage for servers, or "tipped" workers, is \$2.13 per hour, a rate that has not been increased since 1996. The Restaurant Opportunities Centers United (ROC), an advocacy organization for low-income workers in the restaurant sector, reports that servers are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as the rest of the U.S. workforce.¹⁴ Among tipped workers,

women outnumber men by two to one,¹⁵ and the vast majority are women of color.¹⁶ Research shows that tipping as a practice reinforces racial inequities as white servers have been found to receive larger tips than servers of color despite no difference in the quality of service.¹⁷

Unions help to narrow gender wage gaps, giving the biggest boost to women of color.¹⁸ Union-represented workers earn 22 percent more on average than non-union workers,¹⁹ and in women-dominated service industries (including food service) they earn 56 percent more and are far more likely to receive employer-sponsored benefits such as health insurance.²⁰ But the food services workforce has one of the lowest unionization rates.²¹ Turnover rates are high, especially in the fast food industry, where most workers view the jobs as temporary.²² Unfortunately, many also find themselves trapped in these jobs for years.

Female workers who are also mothers face additional barriers. As discussed earlier, the evidence is very clear that exclusive breastfeeding until the age of six months gives babies the best start in life ([See Chapter 2: Nutrition, Growth, and Growing Up](#)). The United States is still the only high-income country that does not guarantee paid maternity leave. Returning to work makes it much more difficult to continue exclusive breastfeeding. Low-income women in service sector jobs have little power to negotiate longer maternity leave with employers, even if they could afford to take unpaid leave. Mothers who return to work less than six weeks after giving birth are three times as likely to stop breastfeeding as those able to wait longer to return.²³

Low-wage jobs typically lack benefits such as paid sick leave and family leave, since federal law does not require employers to offer either. Only 10 percent of mothers who work in restaurants have access to paid sick days,²⁴ even though such access would help them from being fired or forced to quit to care for a sick child. The problem is compounded by a lack of legislation and policies to support working parents, particularly working mothers. There are four times as many single mothers as there are single fathers, and, as in other low-wage industries, single mothers make up a large share of the women working in the restaurant industry.²⁵

Paid sick leave does not solve the recurrent challenges of childcare. In surveys of restaurant workers, access to affordable childcare at nontraditional hours was a top concern.²⁶ Most rely on relatives to babysit or have other informal arrangements. Few licensed childcare providers offer night care.²⁷ Even mothers who work the day shift—not to mention the rest of the working parents of young children in the United States—confront exorbitant costs for high-quality care. In most states, the costs of high-quality center-based care exceeds the cost of housing,²⁸ and there are often long waiting lists for a spot.

All families deserve access to high-quality, center-based childcare during parents' working hours. Quality care is always

paired with early education, and there is strong evidence that children benefit long-term from early education. Childcare surfaced as an issue in the 2020 presidential campaigns of several candidates. Universal childcare has enormous potential to improve the lives of children born into low-income families, reduce income inequality, reduce discrimination against women in the workforce, and ... the list could go on.

Additional material

See Bread for the World Institute's 2018 Hunger Report [*The Jobs Challenge: Working to End Hunger by 2030*](#).

Racism and the Erasure of Food System Diversity

Structural racism runs through food systems. Example one: Discrimination against African American farmers has led to their near erasure from the U.S. food system. Example two: Indigenous groups around the world must defend their lands from incursions that are largely motivated by potential profit from the resources there and destroy important aspects of Indigenous cultures, including traditional food systems. These are two of the most egregious examples of how people of color have been disempowered within the food system.

The Deep Roots of Racism in U.S. Agriculture

Throughout U.S. history, African American farmers have faced systemic discrimination.²⁹ It began with the enslavement of Africans and people of African descent. At the end of the civil war, emancipated slaves were promised "40 acres and a mule." Instead, land promised was given to the white plantation owners who had claimed ownership before the war. The federal government did not intervene when states passed laws prohibiting people of color from owning property. Neither was there any legal recourse when black sharecroppers, or tenant farmers, were charged excessive interest rates that created an inescapable cycle of debt.

As recently as the 1990s, African American farmers were routinely denied loans for which they qualified. Those who were approved for a loan faced lengthy processing delays that made it impossible to get their crops planted on time. The average loan processing time was 220 days for black farmers, compared to 60 days for white farmers.³⁰ In 2010, as part of a civil rights settlement, black farmers who had endured decades of discrimination received token restitution payments from the federal government. For surviving plaintiffs and their families, it was too little too late. Most had lost their land.³¹

As noted earlier in this report, modern farming is a capital-intensive enterprise (See [Chapter 1: Giant Combines and Smallholder Farmers](#)). The enormous wealth gap between white families and families of color virtually guarantees that families of color will not prosper as farmers. The effect of large transfers of wealth, generation after generation, cannot be undone. Farming is the second whitest occupation in America;³² only 1.3 percent of U.S. farmers are African American.³³

The most recent farm bill includes a handful of programs for "socially disadvantaged" farmers, defined as those who belong to a group that has been subjected to racial or ethnic discrimination. African American farmers as well as other farmers of color³⁴ generally qualify for these programs. But the assistance available is very limited, not nearly enough to make U.S. farm policy noticeably more equitable. These are small in the scheme of things. Farm policy as prescribed in the farm bill is still heavily oriented toward promoting commodity crops grown at industrial scale, primarily corn and soybeans.

U.S. farm policy would look much different if there were as much emphasis on nutrition among U.S. residents as there is on exports. Farm policy and nutrition policy can work together to support farmers of color. Evidence that this is needed is plentiful. One example: African Americans and other people of color are at high risk of living in communities that lack access to a full-service grocery store³⁵ that carries a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. The food environment in these neighborhoods is getting worse in some respects, as dollar-discount stores move in to fill the grocery gap. Dollar-discount stores rarely carry fresh produce and they sell mostly ultra-processed foods. Thus, they are likely contributors to poor health and nutritional deficiencies in communities of color. Between 2011 and 2018, the number of dollar-discount stores grew from 20,000 to 30,000, growing fastest in low-income rural and urban communities, especially those in the South.³⁶ The states with the most rapid expansion of dollar-discount stores are those with the highest concentrations of African American farmers.³⁷

Farmer's markets are one way to connect underserved consumers with underserved producers. The 2018 farm bill allocated \$250 million over five years for the healthy food incentive program, providing a bonus benefit to SNAP and WIC households when they purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at farmers markets. Such financial incentives have been shown to increase participating families' consumption of fruits and vegetables.³⁸ As mentioned earlier, poor nutrition is costly. The additional benefits are more than paid for by savings in health care costs, since better nutrition lowers the incidence of type 2 diabetes, heart attack, and stroke.³⁹

African American farmers and other farmers of color are more likely than white farmers to run small- to medium-sized farms,⁴⁰ since these have a lower price tag for essential supplies and equipment. Farmers' market policies favor these smaller farms. But there is a disconnect: the 130,000 U.S. farmers who sell directly to consumers include few people of color. Farmer's markets and other community-level strategies to increase access to healthy food are dominated by white producers who cater predominantly to white consumers.⁴¹

One of the tenets of global health policy is that health workers should come from the communities they serve,⁴² and it makes sense to apply this principle to farmers who sell directly

to consumers since they function in effect as nutrition “out-reach workers.” The larger point is that racism is both a social determinant of health⁴³ and, as discussed, a significant factor in shaping both historical and current agriculture policy. Connecting marginalized producers with marginalized communities and families has the potential to bypass racist elements in the food system and promote better nutrition among families of color.

Additional material

See Bread for the World Institute’s report [Applying Racial Equity to U.S. Federal Nutrition Assistance Programs: SNAP, WIC and Child Nutrition](#), published in 2019.

The Indigenous Experience

The number of Indigenous people in the world is estimated to be 370 million.⁴⁴ Indigenous people, who are descended from and remain connected to original, pre-colonial or pre-conquest civilizations in their home regions, are just 5 percent of the human population, but play a much larger role in supporting the global food system. Indigenous territories encompass 22 percent of the Earth’s land surface and hold 80 percent of its biodiversity.⁴⁵ As we’ve noted elsewhere in this report, biodiversity loss is occurring at a terrifying rate and could ultimately affect the survival of all life on earth. ([See Chapter 3: Today’s Food Production Carries Environmental Consequences](#)).

Indigenous food systems are repositories of knowledge with much to offer the rest of the world. Chaya, also known as Mayan spinach, contains far higher amounts of protein and micronutrients than other dark green leafy vegetables, and it is a hardy plant able to withstand climate change. In Guatemala, chaya sourced from local farmers is used in school feeding programs.⁴⁶

Corn is sacred in Guatemala’s Mayan culture, where villages celebrate the planting of each new crop with religious ceremonies lasting for days. Reverence for the natural world is why Indigenous communities around the world are committed to preserving their traditional food systems. Food is identity, sustainability a matter of survival.

Deforestation is a direct threat to the Indigenous way of life. The Amazon rainforest is home to one million Indigenous people.⁴⁷ Brazil’s president Jair Bolsonaro has made clear that he favors handing over Indigenous lands to miners and cattle ranchers.⁴⁸ The ranching industry staunchly supported Bolsonaro’s run for the presidency and has prospered from his hands-off approach to incursions onto Indigenous territory. Sonia Guajajara, a renowned Indigenous leader, calls what is happening *ethnocide*, the killing off of Indigenous culture.⁴⁹

Indigenous communities in North America are fighting to reclaim their traditional food systems. Native Americans and Alaskan Natives in the United States have a higher prevalence of nutrition-related health problems than the rest of the U.S.

population.⁵⁰ According to the 2015 report *Feeding Ourselves*, more than 80 percent of Native American and Alaska Native adults are overweight, and nearly half of children are expected to develop type 2 diabetes.⁵¹

The U.S. government established the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations in 1973 to address rampant food insecurity on reservations. The program distributes surplus commodities purchased from U.S. farmers. Decades of dependence on canned goods, processed cheese, and other foods of limited nutritional value led to a dietary shift away from traditional foods. While the program has improved food security on reservations, and the quality of foods has improved, there is little doubt that it has also contributed to the high levels of obesity and diabetes. Native communities adopted their own term for this effect, “Commod Bods.”⁵²

The effects of the nutrition transition on U.S. reservations can be easily seen in the health status of two groups of Indigenous people who are closely related and live near each other, one in Arizona and the other across the border in Mexico. The Pima Indigenous community of Arizona has a type 2 diabetes rate more than five times that of the Pima community in Mexico.⁵³ For the Pima community in Mexico, farming remains a way of life, and traditional staples make up a large part of their diets. In Arizona, the Pima were forced to abandon agriculture and the traditional food system after dams rerouted rivers to supply water to white communities, leaving the farmers without water to irrigate their crops.

Eventually, court cases and legal settlements restored the Pima’s water access for irrigation, and agricultural production is resuming. The cultural and spiritual connections that Indigenous communities have with their environment would seem to indicate that a resurgence in traditional food production on reservations is on the horizon. “Living along the river meant our life,” explained Henrietta Lopez, a member of the Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project in Arizona. “I don’t believe that really the non-Indian world understands how we’re tied to the water.”⁵⁴

In Native communities around the country, there has been a growing emphasis on tribal food production as a means of diversifying local economies while simultaneously improving people’s health by enabling them to eat more nutritious foods. The 2018 U.S. farm bill authorized a \$5 million demonstration project that gave tribal governments the authority to purchase traditional foods directly from local producers for the federal food distribution program. Tribal governments have been advocating for the incorporation of traditional foods into the program for many years. Colby Duren, director of the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative, works with tribal affiliates to create healthy food systems. He praised this move as a step forward to “help support the growth of healthy, sustainable food systems in Indian country.”⁵⁵

Undocumented Immigrants and Child Laborers Compelled by Necessity

Undocumented immigrants are among the most powerless workers of all in any food system. Fearing exposure that could lead to deportation, they are vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers. Another extremely vulnerable group is children around the world who are often forced to work on family farms and are pulled out of school to earn income in times when food in the household is scarce or there is no money for school fees.

Undocumented Immigrants

Undocumented immigrants fill many of the food system's lowest-paying, most physically demanding jobs—jobs that other people won't do. Nine of the 18 U.S. industries with the highest percentage of undocumented workers are related to the food system.⁵⁶ (See Figure 4.1). Although the workers may

be paid as little as \$2.13 an hour, which has been the federal “tipped minimum wage” since 1996, this is still usually more than they could earn in their home countries.

Debt bondage increases the financial pressure on many undocumented workers. They owe money to the human traffickers who helped them cross the border—sometimes several borders. Failure to pay what is demanded puts not only the immigrant workers themselves at risk of retaliation, but the families they left behind as well.

Undocumented workers anywhere in the world are vulnerable to traffickers. It is a global industry within food systems. For example, Burmese migrant Saw Win was smuggled into Thailand, expecting to work in a food processing plant and send his meager earnings home to his family. But neither the job nor the wages materialized. Instead, he ended up trapped and forced to work on a fishing trawler. He was never paid. Worse, the crew leader would routinely withhold food rations

FIGURE 4.1

Detailed Industries with Highest Shares of Unauthorized Immigrant Workers, 2016

Populations in thousands

Detailed industry	Total workers	Unauthorized immigrants		U.S.-born share (%)	Lawful immigrant share (%)
		Workers	Share (%)		
Total, civilian labor force (with an industry)	160,910	7,700	5	83	13
Private households	920	200	22	55	23
Landscaping services	1,450	300	20	64	16
Crop production	1,180	230	19	61	20
Dry cleaning & laundry services	310	60	19	56	25
Services to buildings & dwellings	1,600	300	18	61	20
Cut & sew apparel manufacturing	240	45	18	50	32
Animal slaughtering & processing	520	90	17	64	19
Car washes	210	35	16	73	11
Fruit & vegetable preserving & specialty food manufacturing	180	30	15	65	20
Support activities for agriculture & forestry	180	25	15	64	21
Bakeries, except retail	230	30	14	67	20
Construction	10,580	1,350	13	75	12
Retail bakeries	190	25	12	72	16
Seafood & other miscellaneous foods	250	30	11	72	16
Animal production	560	65	11	80	9
Traveler accommodation	1,710	180	11	68	21
Specialty food stores	250	25	10	75	15
Not specified manufacturing	500	50	10	74	16

Note: Industry groups based on U.S. Census Bureau major industry group classifications. Names shortened for display. Industries in this table have at least 100,000 workers nationally and more than double the U.S. share of unauthorized immigrant workers. Smaller sectors with high concentrations not shown. Number of total workers rounded to nearest 10,000. Number of unauthorized immigrant workers rounded according to rules specified in Methodology. Percentages calculated from unrounded numbers; rankings based on unrounded percentages.

Source: Pew Research Center

if he decided the men weren't working hard enough. Beatings were another common form of punishment. One man in a similar situation as Win died after a beating. Win endured these conditions for two years before jumping overboard and swimming to shore in Malaysia.⁵⁷

Americans who eat seafood regularly have almost certainly purchased fish caught by a trafficked worker.⁵⁸ Workers on remote farms or boats are particularly vulnerable. Labor trafficking means forcing a person to work against his or her will.⁵⁹ Smuggling workers across borders by itself is not labor trafficking.⁶⁰ The International Labor Organization estimates that about 25 million people around the world are victims of forced labor, sometimes called modern slavery.⁶¹

In the United States, the agricultural sector employs the largest percentage of undocumented workers.⁶² Nearly all such workers come from Mexico and Central America,⁶³ mainly to pick fruits and vegetables. These crops require delicate hand harvesting. Farm work is one of the most dangerous occupations in the country. Exposure to toxic chemicals leads to high rates of respiratory illnesses and cancers. Up to 3,000 U.S. farmworkers suffer acute pesticide poisoning every year.⁶⁴ Female farmworkers endure additional abuse: 80 percent report that they have been sexually harassed or assaulted by coworkers or employers.⁶⁵

There are approximately one million farmworkers in the United States. Tighter border restrictions and deportations have caused U.S. farmers to rely more on a federal program known as H-2A that grants temporary visas to foreign nationals to work in the agricultural sector. Between 2014 and 2018, the number of H-2A visas issued more than doubled—from 116,689 to 242,762.⁶⁶ But working in the United States under the auspices of a government program does not insulate H-2A workers from exploitation—because abuses in the program have been widely documented. The Polaris Project, an anti-human-trafficking organization, issued a report, based on the analysis of calls to the National Human Trafficking Hotline in recent years, which found that among all the temporary work visa programs, it was the H-2A program that generated the most calls.⁶⁷

No history of the U.S. labor movement is complete without a chapter on the iconic United Farm Workers. Membership in the union is a fraction of what it was 50 years ago. Less than 5 percent of all U.S. farmworkers are covered by a union.⁶⁸ While the golden age of the union movement seems long ago, farmworker activism has not been dormant. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a farmworker-led organization based in Southwest Florida is an example of labor organizing refashioned for the 21st century.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers describes itself as a human rights organization, and labor rights are certainly human rights. The coalition won worldwide recognition in the 1990s

for its anti-slavery campaign, which ultimately liberated 1,200 enslaved U.S. farmworkers. In 2011, the coalition established the Fair Food Program in cooperation with some of the largest food retailers in the United States. The retailers agreed to purchase only produce picked on farms that meet a Fair Food Code of Conduct, which requires fair pay, insurance coverage for work-related injuries and illnesses, and dignified working conditions.⁶⁹

The Fair Food Program has raised the wages and improved the working conditions of tens of thousands of farmworkers.⁷⁰ Farmworkers covered by the Fair Food Code of Conduct no longer have to fear retaliation for registering concerns about working conditions. Farmers agree to being audited by independent monitors to ensure that they are adhering to the code. The *Harvard Business Review* described the Fair Food Program as one of the “most important social impact success stories of the past century” and attributes this success to the incredible persistence of the farmworkers.

Child Laborers

Children may do certain kinds of work under certain conditions, depending on their age and other factors. These legal forms of work are not what is meant by the term “child labor,” which is defined by the international community as “work that deprives children of their childhood, potential, and dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development.”⁷¹ Child labor is seen as repugnant by people almost anywhere. It is associated with a higher risk of death, permanent disability, and a long list of health problems. In some cases, children are working in spaces more confined and dangerous than their adult coworkers.⁷²

Governments around the world prohibit forcing children to work—and yet there are more than 150 million child laborers worldwide. Even worse, recent research estimates that nearly half of the total are children ages 5 to 11.⁷³

No discussion of food systems and how to improve them can ignore the problem of child labor, particularly since more than two-thirds of all child laborers work in the agricultural sector. While there have been moderate declines in child labor in other sectors, in agriculture the numbers are climbing: between 2012 and 2016, child labor in agriculture increased from 98 million to 108 million.⁷⁴ In every world region, more than half of all child laborers work in agriculture, and 85 percent of African child laborers work in agriculture.⁷⁵

One of the biggest challenges in ending child labor in agriculture is that most of it takes place on family farms.⁷⁶ Small-holder farmers are extremely vulnerable to shocks that they have no power to affect, whether it's a drought or flood associated with climate change, the closure of the nearest market for their crops, a sharp increase in the price of foods they cannot produce at home, or one of myriad other things. Child labor is often used as a coping mechanism. When shocks occur,

children are far more likely to be pressed into service to help the household survive. Younger children, more than their older siblings, are likely to be employed in agriculture.

The seasonal nature of agriculture also causes families to use children as workers at the busiest times. International law allows children to work in family enterprises if they are at least 12, the work is not hazardous, and they are not kept out of school.⁷⁷ National labor laws tend to be fairly lenient when it comes to children working on a family enterprise when it is seen as a traditional way of life.

Poverty is the root cause of child labor in agriculture. In Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, two of the largest cocoa-producing nations, the average cocoa farmer earns around 50 cents a day and 84 cents a day, respectively.⁷⁸ Cocoa is one of the most volatile of all agricultural commodities, the farms are generally smallholder operations, and income shocks are simply to be expected.

Even a short-term crisis can have enduring consequences on children's lives. Often children pulled out of school to work do not return to school.⁷⁹ Free primary and secondary education would curb but not end child labor. More than two-thirds of child laborers attend school. Research shows they perform poorly compared to non-working peers.⁸⁰ No doubt, the time and energy devoted to work impedes their ability to focus on education.

Cocoa, coffee, and other commodities are not the cause of child labor. Poverty, and the fact that the global food system offers very few opportunities to move out of poverty, is the reason for child labor. Food companies that profit off of child labor have a responsibility to address it in their supply chains.

Ending child labor is possible if all stakeholders will step up. Consumers have to step up to hold companies accountable. The private sector needs to coordinate with governments,

supporting what agriculture-related ministries are already doing to assist smallholder farm households. Aid agencies need to do more. Few make reducing child labor a high priority of agricultural development assistance. Extending social protection to isolated communities requires national governments to step up. Coverage gaps are widest in rural areas.⁸¹ School feeding programs give parents an incentive to send children to school who would not otherwise. The school meals program in Kenya described elsewhere in this report is one such example ([See In Kenya With a Home-Grown School Meals Program](#)).

Maternal/child nutrition acts as a prevention strategy for child labor, one that is put in place long before children are of school age. Horizons shrink quickly for children who are malnourished early in life, and studies show that child laborers are more likely than peers to have suffered from malnutrition before the age of 2.⁸² The Sustainable Development Goals include ending child labor by 2025, the same year as the World Health Assembly nutrition targets, which call for reductions in stunting, wasting, and overweight in children under 5; anemia in women of reproductive age; and low birth weight among newborns. The targets also include increasing the rate of exclusive breastfeeding.

Up Next

The Nutrition For Growth (N4G) Summit represents a crucial opportunity for the international community to redouble efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 2.2.) of ending hunger and all forms of malnutrition by the end of the decade and the 2025 World Health Assembly targets on maternal and child nutrition. In [Collective Action on Nutrition: More important than ever in light of COVID-19](#), Bread for the World Institute proposes a U.S. government-led effort to lay the foundation for success at N4G.

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