

# Introduction

Giorgio Marrapodi

I would like to begin on a very serious point – namely, with an overview of the data that tell us that while enough food is currently produced to feed the entire world population, about 821 million people suffer from hunger or malnutrition and about 45% of infant deaths are linked to malnutrition.

Among these people, in 2019 alone, 123 million experienced food insecurity caused by crises: humanitarian, environmental, military and, very often, interconnected crises. In 2020, with the health crisis induced by Covid-19, the food supply chains failed in many countries where they are unintegrated and unable to survive external shocks, worsening the whole picture.

At the same time, 1.9 billion people – more than a quarter of the world population – are overweight, costing the global economy the equivalent of 3.5 trillion US dollars a year, and carrying an even more serious cost in human lives.

About 80% of extreme poverty in the world is concentrated in rural areas where climate change and the delay in resilience and mitigation policies aggravate the effects of food insecurity. For years now, a large literature has described the harmful effects of malnutrition on immune responses, which are unable to adequately cope with pathogens and infections, underlining how serious the problem is especially in low-income countries. And, as I have already noted, in 2020, faced with the health crisis, this situation worsened still more.

To tackle such a complex and systemic problem, the Italian Development Cooperation has been trying for years to identify the strategies and actions necessary to put an end to these dramatic numbers: for this reason, food security, proper nutrition and sustainable agricultural development are the traditional priorities of our commitment.

We employ our response in emergencies, working together with efforts by the international community to defeat the food crises in progress, which affect especially some African countries, acting urgently to save the hardest-hit populations.

However, responding to the emergency is not enough; the goal remains to create the conditions for sustainable agricultural and rural development beyond the emergency, to produce systems which are able to endure and react to future shocks, increasing the resilience of more vulnerable populations.

Italy's efforts in this sector have always been a national priority, but alone, as we well know, we can achieve only limited objectives. The synergies that we put into place in this field with the three Rome-based agencies of the United Nations, which together constitute the main global reference point for the fight against hunger and the promotion of sustainable agricultural development, permit us to amplify our range of action.

We are important financial partners of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and of all the agencies of the Rome-based UN hub. Ours is a strong and necessary support, but our effort goes beyond it: we take the role of a leading country in the food and nutrition sector, and export our models, which are based on significant experience in Italian agro-industrial development and are linked to the protection of the territory, to organic production, to the enhancement of local peculiarities, to the system of cooperatives, to the added value in processing and to the quality of food, which today makes for the excellence of the sector.

There is always occasion to strengthen our partnership with FAO, thanks to the leadership of Director General Qu, in order to reinforce our view of an agricultural model based on crop diversification – one which promotes biodiversity and restores ecosystems, achieving a balance that ensures long-term soil fertility.

In our work, we dedicate the utmost commitment to the promotion of sustainable agricultural supply chains, through support across the spectrum: with solid roots in science, but with a solid grounding as well in the human rights that characterize our approach to development, supporting small producers, cooperatives, the involvement of local communities and, last but not least, the enhancement of female entrepreneurship and their trade associations. I left this last point for last – but not because, as Fermat writes, “it is not contained in the narrow margin of the page”.<sup>1</sup> I assure you, it is for us an essential part of our own “theorem”: until everyone acts like human rights are women's rights and

<sup>1</sup> *J'en ai découvert une démonstration véritablement merveilleuse que cette marge est trop étroite pour contenir* (Pierre de Fermat, in a handwritten margin note to his personal copy of Diophantus of Alexandria's *Arithmetica*, in 1637).

women's rights are human rights, once and for all, we will not be free from poverty and hunger, either. 25 years after Hillary Clinton's assertive speech in Beijing, we must unfortunately point out that gender equality has not yet been achieved. Yet until there is true equality, which we must strive to achieve with all the tools available, our work will not be completed.

The Covid-19 emergency has once again shown the importance of resilient food chains, which are capable of reacting to external shocks and continuing their indispensable function of supplying the population.

In a year as difficult as this past one, we have promoted the Food Coalition with FAO to share with other countries our good practices of sustainable agriculture and food supply chains that can be used to create resilient and sustainable food systems and prevent serious crises, like the one we are still experiencing, from interrupting even our most basic needs, such as nutrition.

This model, which entails our view of the humanitarian/development nexus, can save millions of lives which are currently exposed to systemic crises, when they are not tragically lost due to the effects of food insecurity, and we will carry it forward in the main global events of 2020, from the G20 Italian Presidency to the Food Systems Summit in Rome and New York.

I would like to conclude by recalling that often the solutions are at hand, but we are not able to fully grasp them. So this too must be our effort: in carrying out the European *farm to fork* strategy, let us rely on science and nature, which, as the Lincei teach us, do not contradict one another. Let's work with the aim of putting an end to chronic food insecurity for almost a billion people, without moving away from the earth, from agriculture, from food linked to our culture. Most importantly, let's not uncritically turn to the production of food at scale, according to the latest fashion of *lab to fork*.