

## **FOOD AS A CRITICAL METAPHOR FOR GLOBALIZATION: SPAZIALIZATION OF TERRITORIAL IMBALANCES. EVIDENCE FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to represent the spatialisation of the geography of hunger at the national level, taking as its starting point the most alarming situations denoted by the Global Hunger Index (GHI). After identifying the countries that persist in the most severe conditions of food insecurity, the causes that most influence these situations are highlighted, also through the use of specific indicators. Globalisation not only brings the benefit of a global approach to issues of universal solidarity (albeit still feeble in its concrete effects), but also many issues that aggravate the already difficult local situations.

**Key words:** Hunger, food security, globalization, territorial imbalances, Global Hunger Index, polycrisis, food policies

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## INTRODUCTION

The issue of food security - a definition coined at the 1996 World Food Summit<sup>1</sup> and understood in its original meaning as the ability of countries to meet their own national needs - has always accompanied human history as a universal issue, even though, starting after the Second World War, adherence to the monolinear paradigm of modernization based on processes of agricultural industrialization and entrepreneurial approaches to land management ended up shifting the issue of food security from the national to the global scale (Maxwell, 1996; Patel, 2009) and to regionalize the issue of hunger, returning even today a geography of poverty that responsibly questions the whole of humanity.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, while the UN (1948) sanctioned food as a fundamental right guaranteed at international level<sup>2</sup>, a predictive volume by Josué De Castro *Geopolitique de la Faim* (1952) was published, which posed the problem of hunger in a geopolitical key, disavowing any neo-Malthusian derived interpretation, linked to the lack of land and/or the ability to increase food production, even in the face of a forecast of exponential population growth. For De Castro, however, “*la question est également de savoir si les gouvernements voudront bien coopérer à un plan d'alimentation mondiale. Un tel plan est le seul moyen de libérer le monde de la misère matérielle*” (p. 11).

The theme of cooperation invoked by De Castro, however, ended up incorporating the principles of the new world order defined at Bretton Wood in 1944 and translated into the export of the Western liberalist development model supported by the strategy of Structural Adjustment Plans and interpreted in agriculture through the Green Revolution (Patel, 2013) that will impose on a global scale the model of utilitarian agriculture through the export of food aid and agronomic and production techniques (hybrid seeds, pesticides, fertilizers, irrigation systems, mechanization). This will result in a clear commercial dependence of the countries of the global South on those of the capitalist North and the gradual transformation of subsistence agriculture on a family basis into industrial agriculture oriented in particular towards exports. In the face of initial positive results recorded in terms of a doubling of production per hectare with regard above all to the cultivation of rice in Asia and maize in Central America, this model will end up accounting for a series of environmental and social vulnerabilities, causing the progressive impoverishment of soil fertility (due to salinization and increasing erosion) in the loss of biodiversity (as a consequence of monoculture practices), in the destructuring of traditional peasant agriculture (unable to compete on the market due to high production costs and the indebtedness resulting from the import of production inputs), effectively increasing food insecurity because of the weakening of the self-supporting food process.

This scenario has been further aggravated by the combined effects of pandemic and climate crisis, and the Russian-Ukrainian war (see below), where the role of food as a geopolitical weapon has been clearly confirmed (Segrè, 2023), reinforcing an interpretation that, starting from the new millennium, has found in land grabbing a further process of economic-financial and geopolitical hegemony

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<sup>1</sup> “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (Rome Declaration on World Food Security available at <https://www.fao.org/4/w3613e/w3613e00.htm>)

<sup>2</sup> Art. 25 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

fuelled by rich countries to the detriment of peasant communities in the countries of the South, giving rise to a renewed form of neo-colonialism (Hall et al, 2015). The effects are aggravated when land grabbing translates into an instrument of land financialization functional to capital in order to escape the crisis and the fluidity of a (de)globalized economy in search of new privileged assets (*friendshoring*) or into an investment in environmental protection with the spread of no-food crops, such as biomass for biodiesel and bioethanol (Grillotti Di Giacomo, 2018-2019).

Then, the clash between the right to the land (and food) of those who live on it and the highly polarized economic and political interests in the hands of a few financial groups (IPES-Food, 2017) forcefully revives the theme of food sovereignty as enshrined in the Nyéléni Declaration of 2007 according to which “*Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations*”. Such an approach overturns the neo-liberal and market-technological approach at its roots to revive the very idea of food to be valued as a *common*, i.e. as a good of collective interest, and no longer as a commodity, and to re-centralize the issue of land ownership and the role of labour with the just remuneration to be ensured to farmers (Sinatti, 2021). Objectives that refer to the role of governments in safeguarding human rights and in the development of legal frameworks and innovative guidelines to strengthen land governance at an international and national level<sup>3</sup>, together with the need to consolidate a new approach to international cooperation based on economic inclusion through strategies to counter the concentration of wealth and the support of territorial agricultural systems aimed at productive diversification also through forms of solidarity-based economy to the benefit of the most fragile rural populations and with a view to ecological transition (Giunta and Pettenati, 2024).

In fact, however, the process of commodification of a right such as that of food, consequent to the consolidation of an active globalization in an economic-financial key, still confirms all its gravity and stands as a critical voice denouncing the malfunctioning of the globalized economic system. The latest official data available<sup>4</sup>, in fact, estimate 733 million people suffering from hunger and 2.4 billion people inadequately fed, with forecasts to 2030 confirming a hunger condition for 600 million people, thus calling into question the achievement of Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) of the 2030 Agenda.

<sup>3</sup> As in the case of the Voluntary Guidance Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT) developed by FAO and endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security in 2012. The purpose of the guidelines is to “*serve as a reference and provide guidance for improving the governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests with the overall objective of achieving food security for all and supporting the progressive realisation of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security*”. However, a recent study by Land Matrix found poor implementation of VGGTs in Large-Scale Land Agreements (LSLAs) in the 23 African countries considered in the report (Stocchiero, 2023, p. 9).

<sup>4</sup> The figure for the number of hungry people in the world (733 million) refers to the Global Hunger Index 2024 (Wiemers et al., 2024); while the number of people who are not adequately nourished (2.4 billion) is a figure from: FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023. Urbanization, agrifood systems transformation and healthy diets across the rural-urban continuum*, Rome, FAO, 2023.

Behind these data, the aim of our research work, aimed at spatializing a geography of hunger which, even within the interpretative limits referable to a national scale of reading, is to reiterate the urgency of an issue that is increasingly complex and less and less permeable within the sole sphere of agricultural-rural dynamics to assume the role of weak link in the chessboard of the broader global competition for resources, highlighting the weaknesses of the various policies implemented by numerous global actors (FAO, UN) and responsibly questioning all humanity called upon to rethink a new approach to international cooperation.

### **THE GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX (GHI): DEFINITION AND SPATIALIZATION**

The FAO defines hunger as that severe discomfort caused by a lack of sufficient calories, highlighting its multifunctional nature. It speaks of malnutrition, meaning a chronic pathological condition in which an individual does not receive the correct amount of nutrients, either by default (scarcity) or by excess (abundance). Malnutrition by deficiency - typical of the world's lowest income countries - gives rise, in turn, to two dramatic conditions: undernourishment, which implies an insufficient intake of calories for an individual to obtain the minimum amount of energy for a healthy and productive life in relation to gender, age, stature, and level of daily physical activity; and undernutrition, which instead goes beyond calories consumption, and takes into account the lack of essential nutrients, including proteins, vitamins, and minerals, useful for the growth, in the first stage of life of children (see below). In this case, an assessment is made not only from the quantitative point of view of the food consumed, but also from a qualitative point of view, and concerns above all contexts in which there is family food insecurity, partly due to the poor health of the mother, partly from the conditions of poverty linked to insufficient access to health care, lack of safe water or sanitation facilities. On the other hand, malnutrition by excess, overnutrition, leads in any case to an incorrect intake of calories in relation to daily requirements, in this case so excessive as to lead to severe health problems and the development of certain diseases such as obesity (Wiemers et al., 2024).

One of the most widely used instruments for the study of hunger is the Global Hunger Index (GHI). It is an index consisting of four indicators, which take into account the multifunctional nature of hunger:

- undernourishment, previously defined, affecting adults and children;
- child stunting, i.e. the percentage of children under the age of five with insufficient height for their age (chronic undernutrition);
- child wasting, which refers to the percentage of children under the age of five who are underweight for their height (acute undernutrition);
- child mortality, which measures the dramatic combination of inadequate nutrition and survival in unhealthy environments.

These indicators contribute in different ways to forming the index; undernourishment and child mortality each weigh in at one-third, while stunting and child wasting each weigh in at one-sixth. The values are then given a score standardized in excess of the highest global levels of that indicator, and aggregated together, resulting in a GHI score for each country on a 100-point scale, ranging from a minimum, "low" level  $\leq 9.9$ , passing through a "moderate" level from 10 to 19.9, "serious" level from 20 to 34.9, "alarming" level from 35 to 49.9, up to a maximum, "extremely alarming" level, equal to or greater than 50. According to the latest available data, referring to the period 2019-2023, the world-wide GHI

2024 is 18.3, so a significantly "moderate" level (GHI 10.0-19.9), affecting about 733 million people (Wiemers et al., 2024).

However, it should be noted that while the calculation of the Index is based on all four indicators shown, the choice of significant countries to consider upstream is based on only two of the four indicators, that is undernourishment and child mortality; in fact, only countries that have presented a threshold value over the "very low" level for one or both indicators since 2000 are included. Especially when faced with situations of extreme poverty, the reliability of the other two indicators is partially compromised by the variable availability from country to country, as well as the poor availability of this type of data in some countries. It should also be noted that certain types of territories cannot be included in the GHI calculation, such as not independent territories or those with a population below 500.000, precisely because of the scarcity of available data of the two threshold indicators. Clearly, the calculation of the Global Hunger Index does not include either the so-called countries of the North of the World, those with the highest income, including the United States, Canada, Europe, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

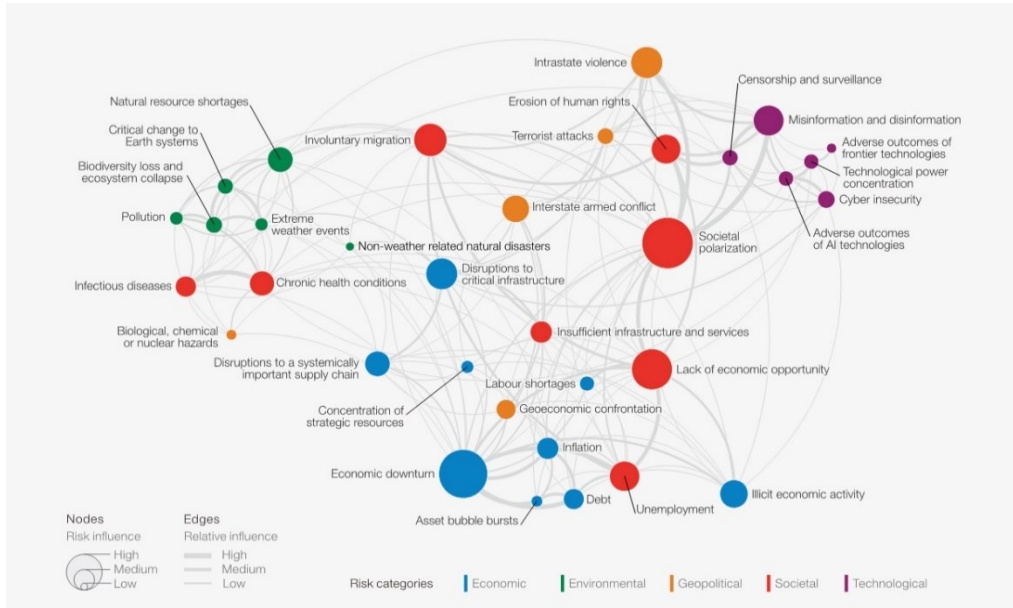
In general, if there is incomplete data for a country, forecasts are made to calculate the GHI level, taking into account certain known data such as "*those GHI indicator values that are available, the country's last known GHI severity designation, the country's last known prevalence of undernourishment, the prevalence of undernourishment for the subregion in which the country is located, and/or assessment of the relevant findings of the 2022, 2023, and 2024 editions of the Global Report on Food Crises*" (Wiemers et al., 2024, p. 41), the latter focused on acute food insecurity.

Until 2016, there was, globally, a significant reduction in hunger levels (going from a serious GHI score of 28 in 2000, to a moderate score of 18.8 in 2016), such that the 7 countries with an extremely alarming GHI saw their index fall to the lower, alarming level; from 2016 to the present, however, there has been a sudden global slowdown (only falling from 18.8 to 18.3), if not worsening, in some cases, hunger levels.

The dramatic situation on a global level is attributable to the phenomenon that has been defined as *polycrisis* (World Economic Forum, 2023), the result of the coexistence of different forms of criticality, which are increasingly interlinked, such as the dynamics connected to climate change, resource dynamics, consequent socio-economic and geopolitical repercussions, socio-political tensions, and in the worst cases, wars, displacement and humanitarian crises, which have been exacerbated by the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian and Middle-East war. This is an increasingly difficult condition to deal with, especially for those countries that already have a strong state of fragility, internal inequality, territorial imbalances and a governance incapable of reacting to global shocks.

The current global scenario, of great instability, presents itself with characteristics of extreme complexity: it is in fact an interconnected set of crisis situations and consequent global risks on several fronts, lasting over time and destined to have future repercussions, encapsulated in the terms *permacrisis* (Brown et al., 2023) and *polycrisis* (Albert, 2024) used, as written, by the Global Risks Report 2023. In addition to analysing the correlation between the different risk categories - in parallel with contrasting global population growth - the Report

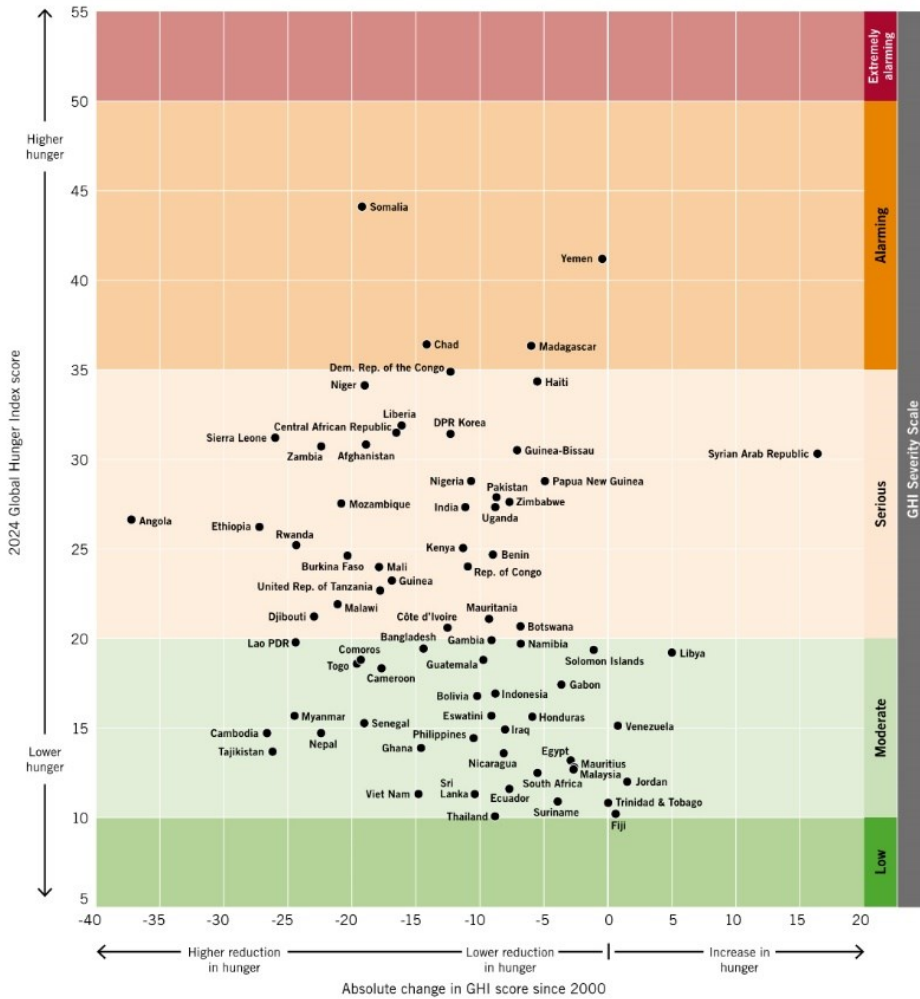
attempts to identify five main risk categories - economic, environmental, geopolitical, social and technological - which in turn are expressed in various types of crises (Figure 1).



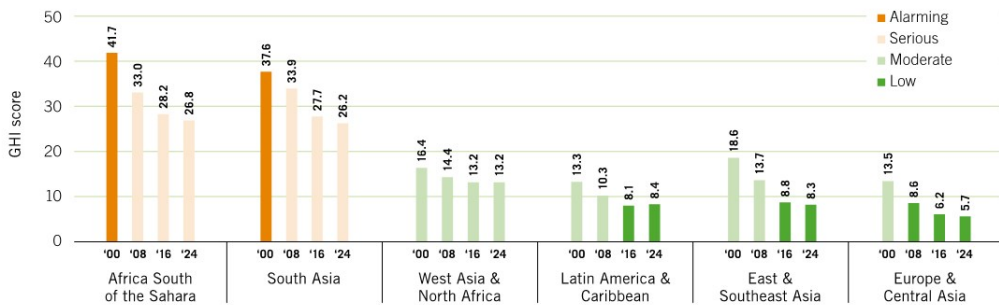
**Figure 1.** Global risks categories landscape and interconnections (Source: World Economic Forum Global Risks, 2023, p. 10)

Figure 2 shows precisely the slowdown in the reduction of GHI scores of the various countries in the world with levels of hunger to be included in the Index calculation in recent years; however, it can be seen that most of the countries are included in the central band of the graph, which collects data on "less hunger reduction", underlining a general situation that is still very far from the "Zero Hunger" objective proposed by the 2030 Agenda. It is not surprising, also, to note the aggravated situation of some countries such as Syria – torn by years of war – or Venezuela – on the verge of economic collapse – both in serious humanitarian crisis; as the situation remains dramatic of 6 countries - most of them in Sub-Saharan Africa and one in Western Asia - that have alarming levels of hunger, remains dramatic.

The macro-regional scale histograms (Figure 3) confirm, in fact, the dramatic GHI levels for Sub-Saharan African (GHI 26.8) and South Asian (GHI 26.2) countries, which, although they saw a significant reduction up to 2016, still unfortunately have values considerably above the global value of 18.3. The global situation is confirmed in Figure 4, in which it is immediately apparent that Africa, particularly the Sahelian and Sub-Saharan belts, is the most compromised continent, with five countries presenting *alarming* levels, Chad, South Sudan, Somalia, Burundi and Madagascar, in addition to Yemen for Asia, a country strongly conditioned by adverse geopolitical conditions.

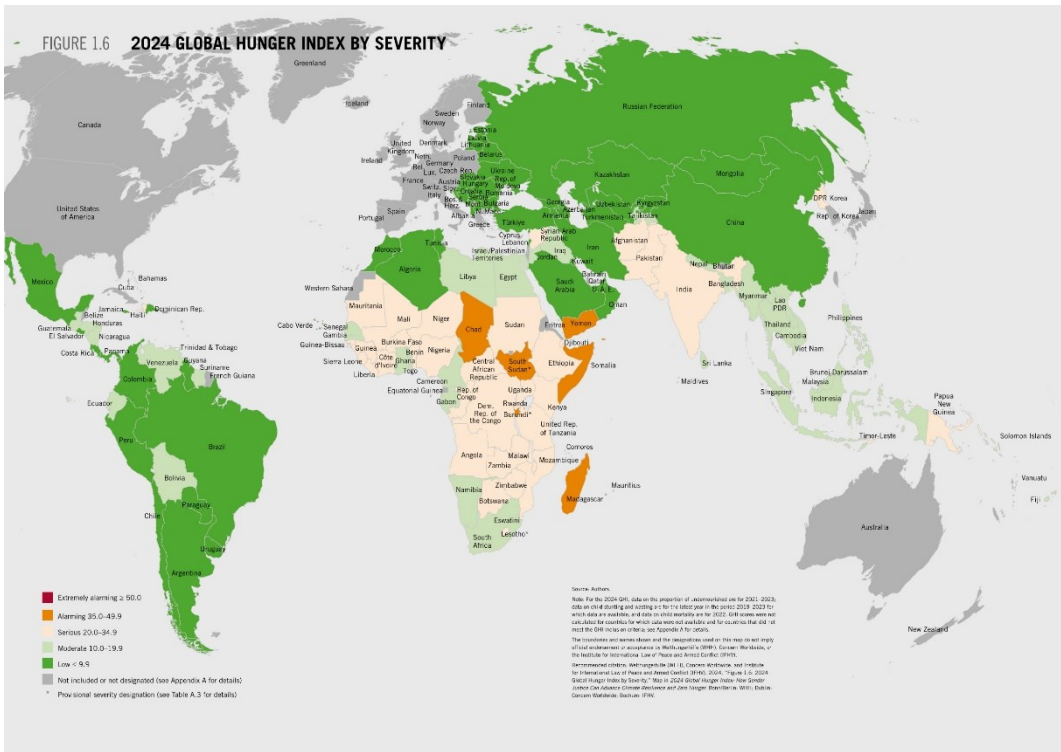


**Figure 2.** Evolution of world hunger levels since 2000  
(Source: Wiemers et al., 2024, p.14)



**Figure 3.** GHI scores by macro-region since 2000<sup>5</sup>  
(Source: Wiemers et al., 2024, p. 11)

<sup>5</sup> As mentioned, the calculation of the GHI does not include the so-called countries of the Global North, so where it says 'Europe', it means Eastern Europe.



**Figure 4.** GHI in the world  
(Source: Wiemers et al., 2024, pp. 22-23)

**THE SPAZIALIZATION OF CASE STUDIES**

The study will focus on the evidence of the case studies of countries that are particularly significant in terms of hunger levels. In addition to the 6 countries identified by the GHI 2024 Report as *alarming* - Chad, South Sudan, Somalia, Burundi, Madagascar and Yemen - we chose to consider other countries with critical situations such as Lesotho, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and Mozambique, which present a *severe* GHI 2024, but which have - based on the reconstruction of the data - a strongly *alarming* history (Table 1).<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, in line with the risk categories identified by the Global Risks Report (paragraph 2), this paper aims to highlight the common types of crises found in all the case study countries. A transversal reading emphasizes that, in recent years, the common thread underlying the further worsening of the already high levels of food insecurity in these countries has been, on the one hand, the Covid-19 pandemic, and, on the other, the Russian-Ukrainian and Middle East wars - situations which, in addition to causing a large number of deaths, have also caused the interruption of important supply chains.

<sup>6</sup> While it is not possible to compare each report with previous years' reports - because data is improved from time to time by UN agencies and, even more so, because the methodology has been changed over the years to include data for some indicators (Wiemers et al., 2024, p.43) - the countries that, as of today, present a GHI 2024 forecast, have been compared with data from previous Reports; in particular, the 2023 Report shows an alarming forecast for South Sudan and Burundi, and an alarming figure (of 35.5) for Lesotho (Wiemers et al., 2023, p.13).



**Table 1.** GHI reconstruction by case study  
(Data source: own elaboration from Wiemers et al., 2024)

#	COUNTRY	GHI 2000	GHI 2008	GHI 2016	GHI 2024
1	Somalia	63,3	59	49,8	44,1
2	Yemen	41,6	36,8	39,6	41,2
3	Chad	50,5	44,8	38,8	36,4
4	Madagascar	42,3	36,6	33,2	36,3
5	Dem Rep of Congo	47,2	41,2	36,2	34,9
6	Central African Republic	48	43,5	32,6	31,5
7	Mozambique	48,3	35,6	38,5	27,5
8	South Sudan	n/a	n/a	n/a	35-49,9
9	Burundi	n/a	n/a	n/a	35-49,9
10	Lesotho	n/a	n/a	n/a	20-34,9

First and foremost, there is an *environmental* problem, for these territories are already heavily subjected to extreme weather phenomena that climate change has helped to amplify. The vertiginous rise in global temperatures has led to a progressive worsening of the climate over the years, with heavy rains, floods, tropical cyclones and soil erosion on the one hand, and droughts, fires and sandstorms on the other. The climate crisis is certainly one of the most worrying issues for those areas of the world that are particularly weak and with high levels of poverty, such as the African continent. It is also the cause of the unproductivity of the land, eventually aggravating the already dramatic lack of food and drinking water availability, as well as being the cause of mass population displacements. In detail, we would like to mention a few significant cases, such as Somalia, which has been hit by years of drought with the consequent risk of famine, and subsequent violent flooding, triggered by the El Niño climate phenomenon, a phenomenon that has also severely affected Lesotho and Mozambique, bringing these countries into an alarming situation that has further intensified the decline in agricultural productivity in recent years (Singh et al., 2023). Yemen is also one of the countries most affected by extreme weather phenomena, including the issue of prolonged droughts to the point of desertification. In this territory, the water problem has been known for a long time, due to the aquifers that are heavily exploited for agricultural use in a context that is increasingly suffering from rising temperatures and recurring droughts, which climate change is further exacerbating (Khalil and Thompson, 2024). A similar situation has been observed in Chad, where desertification and the drying up of the Lake Chad basin (Musa et al., 2022) - due to excessive water withdrawal for agricultural use and unregulated grazing that has limited the soil's capacity to retain rainfall - have exacerbated clashes between nomadic herders and settled farmers, who are constantly fighting for a piece of fertile land and a share of water. And again, due to the effects of climate change, Madagascar is increasingly the victim of destructive environmental phenomena, tropical cyclones, increasingly high temperatures, sandstorms, and, conversely, long periods of low rainfall, the cause of the gradual desertification of the island, along with famine, the gradual disappearance of the ecosystem and the unproductiveness of the fields (Rousseau et al., 2023).

We are also dealing with countries characterized, historically, by strong *political instability*; instability that brings with it strong social vulnerability, mistrust in the state, social unrest, internal revolts, and even coups and civil wars. As far as the African continent is concerned, the problems of instability have their roots in the post-colonial era, in which the great European powers drew borders on the territory, bringing together ethnic groups that were also very different from each other, especially from a religious point of view, and forced to live together. This strong fragmentation and lack of national unity have been, over the years, a reason for great political, economic and social vulnerability. A representative case is certainly that of Somalia; when the dictatorship of Siad Barre ended after more than twenty years, a bloody war between clans began in 1991, which is still going on, to which was added the component linked to Islamic terrorism, from which the jihadist group al Shabaab was born, responsible for continuous terrorist attacks in the country (Ciabbari, 2023). Even Chad, after forty years of civil war between the northern regions - supported by Libya, with a Muslim majority - and the southern regions - supported by France, with a Christian majority - is still in a very unstable political situation. After years of dictatorship, there was a *coup d'état* in 1990 that brought General Déby to power; the growing internal political opposition, combined with the new turbulence that has arisen since 2003 from the government's stance towards the reception of refugees fleeing the conflict in Sudan, has led to three coup attempts over the years. At the same time, another major risk for the country is the looming outbreak of Islamic terrorism (ISPI, 2021). There is also persistent instability in the Democratic Republic of Congo; since 1994, the country has been plagued by civil wars and conflicts with its neighbouring countries, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda, over disputes over territory that is very rich in soil and subsoil resources, aggravated by the succession of dictatorships and high levels of corruption in government (De Felice and Grillotti Di Giacomo, 2024). The Central African Republic, in turn, has for years been the scene of wars and continuous conflicts; after gaining independence from France (1960) it has seen a succession of coups and dictatorships for over thirty years. In 2003, a civil war broke out following the *coup d'état* of self-proclaimed President François Bozizé, which led to a coup in 2013 and the rise of various armed groups vying to rule the country (De Felice and Grillotti Di Giacomo, 2024). South Sudan still carries the legacy of a bloody separation in 2011, following decades of civil war, from neighbouring Sudan. Subsequently, in 2013, a new violent civil war broke out in the country, between the country's two largest ethnic groups, the Dinka and Nuer, which was accompanied by further guerrilla warfare between secondary ethnic groups, for control of portions of territory in the fledgling country (Montanini, 2013). After the end of the civil war in 2015, Burundi saw the dictatorial figure of Nkurunziza rise to power, who remained in government for three terms, brutally suppressing the popular uprisings of Hutus and Tutsis, united in protest, with armed forces. Then followed years of great instability, with a conspiratorial *coup d'état* against the new president, and frequent armed rebel groups attacking in various parts of the territory (Istituto Geografico De Agostini, 2024, pp.408-409). Lastly, among the countries under attack on the African continent, Mozambique is still at the mercy of Islamic terrorist groups, attracted by the country's energy resources (Mabiso et al., 2014). Among the case studies analysed, the only non-African country is Yemen; one of the poorest countries in the Middle East, Yemen had already been the scene of clashes since 2011, a period dating back to the so-called Arab Spring, when

Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi came to power in place of Ali Abdullah Saleh. By 2014, tensions became so high that a civil war broke out, between the Shia Muslim rebel movement of the Houthi against the Hadi government; 2015 then saw a further escalation of the conflict, when Saudi Arabia and eight other Sunni states went to war against the Houthi (Tandon and Vishwanath, 2020).

Consequently - on the one hand as a historical legacy, and on the other in response to the correlation of the different types of crises - the *socio-economic* situation of these countries appears to be compromised to date, with significant levels of poverty, which can be associated with factors endogenous to the territory, such as the availability and productivity of arable land, or exogenous factors, such as the effects of climate change, geopolitical tensions and national and international conflicts, the interruption of supply channels resulting directly from wars, or indirectly from the increase in the prices of imported foodstuffs. The African economy is almost entirely based on agriculture, but it is a sector that must contend with conditions of great backwardness, lack of infrastructure and trade channels - leading to not only geographic but also economic isolation - as well as, often, with the quality of the soil and the poor accessibility of water resources. This is, for example, the situation in Somalia, where the agricultural sector, which has always been fundamental to the local economy, has been severely penalised by these polycrisis phenomena, leading the country to import more than half of its food (Hussein et al., 2021), but not with little difficulty since war often interferes with the country's already precarious distribution networks and infrastructure, in some cases completely interrupting supply channels (Hastings et al., 2020). A combination of factors, together with climatic ones, that contribute, in a vicious circle, to worsening socio-economic and environmental conditions, making the population's ability to adapt increasingly difficult, and increasing food insecurity (Thalheimer et al., 2023). Currently, more than half of Somalia's population (51.3%) does not receive sufficient daily calorie intake, constituting the second highest figure among countries in the world, after North Korea, as well as being the third country in the world for high levels of infant mortality and the country with the highest GHI (44.1) derived from hard data<sup>7</sup>. Yemen is also experiencing the close correlation of the crises analysed especially at the level of agricultural production and consequent economic isolation, caused by the extreme effects of climate change and war, which will very soon increase its already significant dependence on food imports (Dureab et al., 2019). Political instability also plays a significant role; in 2018, the closure of maritime and land links caused a drastic cut in the tons of resources entering the country, such as food or fuel, resulting in higher prices, as well as significant damage to imports (which constitute almost all sources of food for Yemen), contributing to the risk of famine (Rahmat et al., 2022). To date, it is the second country in the world, after Burundi, for high levels of child stunting (48.5%), the third for levels of child wasting and still among the top five countries for malnutrition (almost 40% of the population is undernourished) (Wiemers et al., 2024). Chad, Madagascar and the Central African Republic are countries that are experiencing severe difficulties in recovery. The succession of shocks and polycrisis has not allowed the already severely compromised Chad to recover, entering a constant state of emergency;

<sup>7</sup> According to the GHI 2024 Report, Burundi and South Sudan do not have enough data available to determine an accurate value; their value, therefore, fluctuates in the 'alarming' category between 35 and 49.9, so they could be lower than Somalia, but also much higher.

the country is, in fact, ranked 190th out of 191 in the world on the Human Development Index (Kang et al., 2023) and in 2024 it is the fourth country in the world for high levels of infant mortality. Furthermore, Madagascar is the fourth country in the world for malnutrition (almost 40% of the population is undernourished), as well as being among the top countries for high levels of child stunting. Despite the introduction of the Integrated Food Security Classification (IPC) programme in 2016, to date almost 14,000 people in the country are at level 5, known as *catastrophic*, of food insecurity. This is the first time that Madagascar has recorded such a dramatic level, due to drought, disease, sandstorms, years of deforestation and subsequent soil erosion. Polycrisis has led to the Central African Republic having very high levels of child mortality and almost half of the children suffering from chronic undernourishment (Wiemers et al., 2023). In 2021, more than 70% of the population was below the international average for poverty and among the lowest levels of education, ranking 188th out of 191 on the Human Development Index (Stambach et al., 2024). Potentially, however, the Democratic Republic of Congo would have very good agricultural conditions; unfortunately, despite several national programmes to increase production since the 1990s, there is still a large gap between possibilities and actual response. Difficulties clearly aggravated by the economic, political and health crises (Manyong et al., 2024). Conditions that further worsened undernutrition levels to 37% in 2024 (Wiemers et al., 2024). Mozambique's economy is predominantly based on agriculture (99% of farms in the territory are family-owned); clearly, given the climate emergency that has been ongoing for years, households that depend on agriculture, thus the majority, are the most at risk (Abbas et al., 2024). An interesting study conducted in 2020 uncovered some common factors associated with acute malnutrition in the country, such as coughs, fever, diarrhoea, having experienced shock or unusual events, and lack of access to basic sanitation (Zaba et al., 2020), testifying to the dramatic living conditions of these populations. As mentioned, extreme precarious conditions exist in South Sudan, where widespread poverty, lack of services and infrastructure, severe food insecurity, malnutrition, high levels of infant mortality, poor sanitation, epidemic diseases and frequent contamination of drinking water coexist (Sassi, 2021). According to the Integrated Food Security Classification, in 2023, almost half of the population (46%) was in a situation of acute food insecurity, unable to meet even basic food needs; in addition, considering that almost the entire country is in a state of crisis, there is no area with low levels of food insecurity, while, on the contrary, there are many with emergency levels (Tong and Moro, 2024). Burundi is also a country heavily dependent on agriculture, although, due to the scarcity of arable land, it has a low productivity and incisivness of the economic sector. As a result, it has one of the highest levels of poverty in the world, more than 70%, as well as the highest rate of child stunting in the world (almost 60%), an indication of very high food insecurity, starting with maternal food security (Wiemers et al., 2023). According to the Global Food Security Report, in 2018, Burundi was ranked 9th in the world for food insecurity, with 50% of the population in a situation of chronic food insecurity (Odjidja et al., 2019). Finally for Lesotho, complicit in the government's inability to provide effective interventions and action plans, malnutrition also depends on poor access to different food groups. Agricultural productivity, which is predominantly subsistence, is severely compromised by climate disasters, forcing the importation of food, resulting in higher prices. This condition is increasingly driving the population towards a carbohydrate-laden diet, which is

paradoxically veering the issue towards overnutrition (Nkoko et al., 2024). Due to the severe weakness of its economic sectors, Lesotho is heavily dependent on neighbouring South Africa.

### **THE (NOT EVOLVING) POLICY SCENARIO**

In 1948, the United Nations recognized the right to food as a fundamental human right. Since then, guidelines have been introduced to help countries around the world make this inalienable right a reality, to which other guidelines and declarations have been added, again with the aim of making governments more and more accountable.

In an attempt to help peoples and governments manage and optimise land resources, while also trying to improve the disastrous levels of food insecurity and access to basic services, numerous interventions have been introduced by bodies such as the FAO and the United Nations, of which the most recent and significant examples for the countries analysed are given below.

Recently in Somalia, the FAO, together with other partners, launched a five-year action programme (“Jowhar Offstream Storage Programme”, 2024) aimed at improving water resource management, ensuring constant access to water, and increasing the climate resilience of the region, by strengthening the agricultural sector, laying the foundations for greater economic and political stability in the country, and of course addressing weak food security. This forward-looking project is in addition to its predecessor - Climate Resilient Agriculture “Ugbaad” (2024) - presented at the 40th meeting of the Green Climate Fund (GCF), which aims to improve the resilience of agri-food systems through large-scale investments. In Yemen, on the occasion of World Food Day 2024, organized in the country by the FAO, the need was highlighted to guarantee the right and access to food for the entire population, to intervene on water management and with the introduction of sustainable practices in agriculture, as well as to value women entrepreneurs as a valuable contribution to the creation of resilient local economies (in full coherence with the theme that forms the backdrop of the GHI 2024 Report). In Chad, from 2017 to 2021, with the promise of the introduction of a new cycle, the FAO introduced the “Country Programme” to strengthen food security, through the development of supply chains in agriculture, livestock, fisheries, forestry, and the formulation of policies and strategies for both the achievement of food security and the implementation of sustainable resource management systems. In addition, since 2023, the “Green Graduation Programme” has also been introduced in the country by Concern Worldwide<sup>8</sup>, which offers the opportunity to train the population on the application of important sustainable agricultural techniques and adaptation strategies. In Madagascar, between 2022 and 2024, the FAO and Slow Food International have introduced an action programme to safeguard biodiversity and agrobiodiversity, supporting small-scale farmers, fishermen and forest dwellers through the creation of sustainable and more inclusive agri-food systems. In addition, the two organizations have been working together since 2013 to support rural communities and diversity. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, FAO works on the ground to improve access to food, providing livestock for subsistence, seeds,

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<sup>8</sup> This programme has also been introduced in other African countries, Bangladesh, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Somalia.

supporting both food processes and proper food storage, as well as intervening to combat crop and livestock diseases in an effort to improve levels of malnutrition in early childhood. Among the various events designed for the Central African Republic, the World Food Forum (FMA) 2023, has provided a strategic plan of investment and funding for those initiatives that promote sustainable and resilient agri-food systems. In Mozambique, the initiative started with the government itself, which, following the 1996 World Food Summit, in an attempt to curb the country's dramatic conditions, implemented a series of programmes and action plans to reduce poverty levels, chronic malnutrition and food insecurity (Cinquenta et al., 2023). Furthermore, in July this year (2024), the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) and the FAO signed a project for the sustainable management of the Miombo forests, a vital source of livelihood for so many families living in rural areas, by intervening on biodiversity conservation, implementing resource management practices, improving market access and the prospects of small farmers. In South Sudan, collaboration between the UN and FAO has already led to the averting of famine in recent years, but we are still a long way from a viable solution. For its part, the FAO is working to bring in specific expertise in food production, as well as having a pivotal role in coordinating humanitarian interventions in agriculture and livestock. To cope with the dramatic conditions in Burundi, the FAO is intervening on several fronts, with the reconstruction of agricultural infrastructure to ensure accessibility to food, introducing, in 2021, some programmes such as "Hand in Hand", "One Country, One Priority Commodity", which aim to improve levels of food insecurity in the medium to long term, as well as specific projects to help communities living in catchment areas to optimise their production. Finally, in Lesotho, as a support to the government's vulnerability, the FAO has introduced a new "Country Programming Framework (CPF)" (2024), with the objective of transforming the country's agri-food systems, improving agricultural production and productivity, to contribute to food security, which is also being challenged by the impact of Covid-19 and avian influenza. In addition to the CPF, other technical cooperation projects, also promoted by FAO, are planned to include the use of technologies to improve agricultural practices and rural development in the country, introduce sustainable urban planning, and finally, a third project on the development of the aquaculture supply chain.

Despite the progress made between the years 2000 and 2016, there has been a drastic slowdown in the fight against hunger in recent years, due to the period of polycrisis that characterises the contemporary world.

All this implies the need for greater investment at international level to reduce the problem of malnutrition in vast areas of the planet, but the question arises as to which political entity will take on this responsibility, i.e. which will draw up new policies of food solidarity with concrete actions.

Chichaibelu et al. (2021, p. 14) are emblematic on this issue: "Yet, given the finding that investments to end hunger are rather modest, the troublesome question arises, what political economy forces prevent the required actions? Obviously, the spending priorities of those who could mobilise the resources seem not sufficiently oriented towards overcoming hunger, and the voice and influence of the undernourished seem too weak to enforce the investment action".

To date, therefore, despite the efforts of the FAO, some governments and various international organizations with humanitarian aims, the gap between policies and their actual implementation is becoming increasingly significant, making the Zero Hunger goal of the 2030 Agenda a long way off.

### A SOCIO-ECONOMIC OVERVIEW OF THE CASE STUDY COUNTRIES

Inequality in access to food and the resulting suffering of chronic hunger in some countries of the world often have ancient roots but have often been amplified in recent years by catastrophic natural and anthropogenic events.

The causes are multiple and often stratified, overlapping in their harmful effects, thus generating negative spirals from which it is difficult to free oneself to undertake virtuous development paths, also due to the substantial incapacity of weak and unprepared governance strategies.

By developing some indicators relating to the socio-demographic and economic dimensions, chosen from the World Bank database, for the countries identified as the most vulnerable, it is possible to outline a picture, although certainly not complete, of the current situation of these countries and of the recent evolution that has occurred so far in the 21st century.

The chosen indicators were observed, for the countries designated as case studies, in their evolutionary dimension for the most part in the period 2000-2023 but, where the data were only partially available, we adapted to include the most recent data, trying to have the widest time interval available. In some cases, unfortunately, the data is not available at all and, therefore, it was not possible to obtain significant values. The indicators obtained were compared with global trends, to see if the performances were higher, generally in line with them, or lower. The idea behind this analysis is to try to understand the current and future development trajectories through a synthetic quantitative reading.

#### *Socio-demographic dimension*

The socio-demographic dimension is represented through the selection of six indicators: population trend, unemployment in the total workforce, percentage of employment in agriculture, gross percentage of secondary school enrolments, health expenditure in relation to GDP, and infant mortality under 5 years of age. To summarise the work carried out, a panel is presented (figure 4), which schematically highlights the current situation. As regards the population, the global trend indicates an increase from 6.1 to over 8 billion people (almost 32%) from 2000 to 2024, but even higher values have been recorded in the countries taken into consideration.

Most of the countries considered have a rather small population, under 50 million residents, with the notable exception of the Democratic Republic of the Congo with almost 106 million residents. From this perspective, the significant population increases must however be placed in the perspective of modest general increases at an overall level, but still significant in areas where daily sustenance is already in dramatic conditions.

Trend	Population	Unemployment	Employment in agriculture (% of total)	Secondary school enrollment	Health expenditure (% of GDP)	Under-5 mortality rate
Higher trend	Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo D.R., Madagascar, Mozambique, Somalia, South Sudan, Yemen	Mozambique, Somalia	Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo D.R., Madagascar, Mozambique, South Sudan	Burundi, Chad, Congo D.R., Lesotho, Madagascar, Mozambique	Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo D.R., Lesotho, Mozambique	Central African Republic, Chad, Lesotho, Madagascar, Somalia, South Sudan
In line with the global trend		Yemen	Lesotho, Somalia	Central African Republic, Yemen		Congo D.R., Yemen
Lower trend	Lesotho	Chad, Congo D.R., Lesotho, Madagascar	Yemen	Somalia	Chad, Madagascar, Yemen	Burundi, Mozambique
Data not available		Burundi, Central African Republic, South Sudan			Somalia, South Sudan	

**Figure 5.** Panel of socio-demographic trends of case study countries  
(Source: own elaboration on World Bank data)

To cite some of the situations in which there have been sudden and marked increases in population, Chad from 2000 to 2024 has seen an increase from 8.3 to 18.8 million residents, with a forecast of 36.5 million by 2050. The Democratic Republic of the Congo has gone from 48.6 to 105.6 million residents, with a forecast of 217.5 million residents by 2050. Even smaller countries such as Burundi and Somalia show notable growth dynamics, doubling their overall population in the period considered.

Such a sudden increase in the resident population at first glance may seem a positive sign of evolution of societies, but if it does not correspond to a simultaneous development of the economy, it is very likely that a worsening of living conditions will occur, due to a need to cope with an increased demographic weight that has not corresponded to a marked economic boost, thus prompting a stress on the carrying capacity of the country system.

The unemployment rate compared to the total workforce is a valuable indicator, but still fragmented and not always available in different countries. At a global level, the index was equal to 5.515 in 2000 and in 2021, the last year presented, increasing to 6.19%. In the countries taken into consideration, the data were partly unavailable or in any case dated back to many years ago, but, in any case, some considerations can be highlighted.

Many of the most recent data for these countries indicate very low unemployment values compared to the world average, which are quite surprising, such as Chad (1.1% in 2018) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (1.5% in 2020). In other cases, unemployment is very high, such as in Somalia (18.8% in 2019) or Yemen, where the data has not been updated for a long time (13.5% in 2014).

The high level of employment actually hides a situation which is very often composed of unskilled labour in rural areas, sometimes channelled to the mines and commercial agriculture, and, later, secondary industry. The State often allows for lower-wage, labour-intensive firms to operate in poorer, rural areas where workers are less skilled and face limited income-earning opportunities.

Looking more specifically at the data regarding those employed in agriculture, we note that globally the percentage of total workers goes from 39.80% in 2000 to 26.36% in 2022. However, this global contraction is reflected differently in countries, especially the less developed ones. In them, agriculture often remains the refuge sector, low paying, but also almost the only point of reference, given that there are no real employment alternatives.

While it is true that the dynamics of agricultural employees are all contracting, attracted by alternative employment, such as mining, some labour-intensive manufacturing industries and mostly basic services, almost all have reductions in the number of workers below the world average over the period 2000-2022. To give some examples, in Burundi the workers employed in agriculture in this period went from 91.86% to 85.06%, and values around 70% are recorded in Mozambique, Central African Republic, Madagascar and Chad. The lowest value of the countries taken into consideration is in Somalia with 25.92%, due however to the difficulties of cultivation in the country and the existing social and ethnic tensions.

The improvement of living and working conditions, which could indirectly allow better access to food and alleviate the issue of widespread hunger, should have as a fundamental turning point an improvement in overall education. In this regard, the gross enrollment rate in secondary school was taken into



consideration, which at a global level sees a significant improvement from 58.54% in 2000 to 77.10% in 2023.

The data for the countries under study are much more fragmented, but all show some improvement, except for Somalia, whose 2023 indicator is equal to 3.29%, even lower than the 6.08% value of 2007 (there are no other data in the early 2000s). Among the highest values are Lesotho with 59.82% (data from 2017) and the Democratic Republic of Congo with 56.83%.

The strengthening of secondary and tertiary education must therefore be an objective to be pursued more incisively by the governments of these countries, as first steps to emerge from underdevelopment. Currently, the situation in this sense still shows values too distant from those of the world average and international projects to improve their schooling systems.

Another fundamental objective to be pursued by developing countries is the improvement of their healthcare system. The indicator of healthcare expenditure in relation to GDP reflects the commitment of governments to the healthcare needs of their inhabitants. In this sense, at a global level the level has risen from 8.62% in 2000 to 10.45% in 2021.

In countries with a high GHI there are several cases in which healthcare expenditure is quite high compared to the modest GDP, highlighting significant percentages in 2021 as in the cases of Lesotho (10.21%), Burundi (9.10%), Central African Republic (9.07%), Mozambique (9.05%). Observing the evolution from an exclusively numerical point of view, without being able to enter into a qualitative assessment of the expenditure incurred, it can still be highlighted that in these countries, the healthcare objective seems to be at the centre of the agendas of many governments and a clear improvement seems to be occurring in recent years.

Yet, to counterbalance this good result, the figure for infant mortality under five years of age is still very high. At a global level, the figure for 2000 was 76.40 per thousand children in the age group up to five years, while in 2022 it had dropped to 37.1 per 1,000.

In all the countries taken into consideration there has been a significant decrease, often however with trends lower than the global ones, so that all the current values remain higher. Among the most worrying indicators, we can highlight the data from Somalia (106.1 per thousand), Chad (102.9), South Sudan (98.8) and the Central African Republic (96.8), but in general all countries need to significantly improve their infant mortality rates.

It is therefore necessary to make significant progress in ensuring the health of newborns in these countries, as far as possible. In this issue, correct nutrition in this more fragile age group plays an essential role. Progress is visible despite the difficult conditions in which we operate, but further efforts must be urgently undertaken, also improving medical knowledge and assistance infrastructures in developing countries gripped by the problems of endemic hunger.

### *Economic dimension*

The economic dimension is explored by looking at six dimensions: percentage of population in extreme poverty (with a maximum of \$2.15 per day), trend of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), gross savings as a percentage of Gross National Income (GNI), percentage of Gross Domestic Product deriving from agriculture, agricultural materials and food exports (% of merchandise exports), agricultural materials and food imports (% of merchandise imports).

The figure below (figure 5) summarises the trends in the indicators taken into consideration for the countries under study, in a similar way to what was done for the socio-demographic component, to underline some brief considerations on the performance of the selected countries in the period from the early 2000s to the latest available data.

According to the World Bank, poverty measures based on international poverty lines attempt to hold the real value of the poverty line constant across countries. The last change in the statistical methodology was in September 2022, when World Bank adopted \$2.15 as the international poverty line using the 2017 PPP.

At a global level, a very positive trend can be noted in this index, which from 2000 to 2022, the last year currently available, decreased by 69%, going from a percentage of the world population below the poverty line equal to 29.3% to 9%.

Many of the countries studied have seen a reduction in the number of their population below the poverty line, but in a smaller proportion than the global trend. Some have even seen an increase in the number of their poor population. The data are very fragmented and, in many cases, not updated. However, to give examples of the trends, it can be observed that the best performances are in Lesotho and Chad, but in the latest available years, the number of poor is still extremely poor. For Chad, the 2022 data indicates that 30.8% of the population is poor, while for Lesotho the 2017 data highlights 32.4% of poor people. These data are unfortunately to be considered the best, given the situation, on the opposite scale, of Madagascar (80.7% of the population below the extreme poverty line in 2012), Democratic Republic of Congo (78.9% in 2020), Mozambique (74.5% in 2019).

The inability of many people to generate incomes adequate for a normal life for many people in these countries does not allow the satisfaction of minimum needs, first of all those of access to food and minimum care. Among the causes of what is defined, sometimes, with excessive resignation, as "endemic poverty", we can still highlight the rigidities and deformations of local markets due to colonial and post-colonial logics. But they have not been overcome for various reasons among which emerge the poor performance of economic policies, illustrated by inadequate distribution of income and expenditure, low savings and investment ratios, absence from market economy, insufficient emphasis on the role of women in national development processes, the limited impact of export sectors, failed regional integration initiatives, and the debt crisis.

Trend	Extreme Poverty (headcount ratio at \$2.15 a day)	Gross Domestic Product (GDP)	Gross Savings (% of GNI)	Agriculture (% of GDP)	Agricultural raw materials and food exports (% of merchandise exports)	Agricultural raw materials and food imports (% of merchandise imports)
Higher trend	Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo D.R., Lesotho, Madagascar, Mozambique, South Sudan, Yemen	Chad, Congo D.R., Mozambique, Somalia	Burundi, Congo D.R., Mozambique	Mozambique, Yemen	Lesotho, Yemen	Lesotho, Madagascar, Mozambique, Yemen
In line with the global trend			Madagascar			
Lower trend		Burundi, Central African Republic, Lesotho, Madagascar, Yemen	Lesotho	Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo D.R., Lesotho, Madagascar	Burundi, Central African Republic, Madagascar, Mozambique	Burundi, Central African Republic
Data not available	Somalia	South Sudan	Central African Republic, Chad, Somalia, South Sudan, Yemen,	Somalia, South Sudan	Chad, Congo D.R., Somalia, South Sudan	Chad, Congo D.R., Somalia, South Sudan

**Figure 6.** Panel of economic trends of case study countries (Source: own elaboration on World Bank data)

The observations on poverty conditions are apparently somewhat contrasted by the trend of Gross Domestic Product, which in any case appears to be increasing in almost all countries. At a global level, GDP has essentially doubled from 2000 to 2023 (with an increase of 91%), mainly due to the marked increase in the value produced by services.

As regards the countries considered, almost all of them show an increase in GDP, but sometimes with dynamics that are more contained than the global ones. Among the best performances it is possible to highlight those of Mozambique, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia.

Even though the overall GDP performance of these countries needs to be strengthened, the main issue concerns the fair distribution of income, where economic growth, net of the significant penalties resulting from high inflation rates, benefits a limited number of people belonging to the upper classes.

The data on gross savings on the GNI is very interesting for understanding this aspect, that is, the ability of people to retain wealth. Unfortunately, in many of the countries observed this indicator is not available and this limits the considerations.

At a global level, the percentage of gross savings on the GNI went from 24.17% to 27.79%. In the countries considered for which data are available in all cases, the saving capacity is lower although in the Democratic Republic of the Congo the data is close to the world average (25.53% in 2021), while on the opposite scale the case of Burundi is noteworthy for the lower data (5.53% in 2018).

The low propensity to save also derives from the configuration of existing economic activities and the trade balance.

In the world, the percentage of Gross Domestic Product deriving from agriculture is very modest, although slightly increasing in percentage terms, going from 3.35% in 2000 to 4.12% in 2023.

In the countries studied, these percentages are much higher, although in several cases they are decreasing. The economies are therefore still deeply rooted in the primary sector, but, despite this, it is often conducted as a typology for subsistence and self-consumption, proving to be scarcely effective in alleviating the problem of hunger overall. The reduction in the incidence of the percentage contribution to the Gross Domestic Product deriving from agriculture, therefore, could also be seen as an important signal of evolution of the economy of these countries. But the road is still long if we consider that it still affects more than 20% in many countries: Yemen (28.7% in 2018), Central African Republic (28.6%), Mozambique (26.7% in 2022), Burundi and Chad (both above 25%) and Madagascar (21%).

Therefore, agriculture on the one hand needs to be made more efficient and modernized with investments that allow the development of local entrepreneurship and effective access to ownership by communities, avoiding the transfer of land to external companies. On the other hand, it must be a vital support sector to reduce hunger in these countries, but, at the same time, it is necessary to promote concrete actions to diversify the economy, which reduce its weight on GDP as is happening in the rest of the world, but with a view to expanding the overall economy, not to contracting agriculture, which is a vital support for the sustenance of local communities.

The last two indicators taken into consideration concern exports and imports of agricultural raw materials and food.

Globally, exports of agricultural products and food have increased from 8.91% to 10.05% of the total value. For several countries taken into consideration, data are not available, but in general there are two types of situations. For some they have a marginal weight (Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic), while for others (Burundi, Lesotho and Yemen) they represent an essential component of the trade balance.

Going into more detail, two examples can be drawn from the World Bank database.

Yemen has exports in 2019 equal to 24 US\$ Mil compared to much larger imports equal to 4,716 US\$ Mil (on which petroleum and oil imports weigh heavily). Exports, typically from a very poor country, mainly concern the statistical categories of “wheat or meslin flour” and “groats and meal of wheat”, similar products directed mainly towards Egypt and Türkiye.

Burundi has a similar situation, but the country generally exports intermediate or finished products, although it still faces a strong trade deficit. In 2022, it had 208 US\$ Mil of exports, while imports reached 1,260 US\$ Mil. Among the exported products, there are goods related to commercial agriculture, not directed to the local market, such as coffee, black tea and beer. In this last case, therefore, the agricultural system is better, but still with a configuration typically inherited from the colonial period, in which the territories are dedicated to the production of goods not intended for the sustenance of the local community and the reduction of hunger, but for the profit of a few entrepreneurs who earn on foreign markets.

Imports of agricultural raw materials and food show a similar percentage of the total between 2000 and 2023, going from 9.23% to 9.79%.

In the countries studied where data are available, the incidence of imports of agricultural and food products is very high.

For example, Lesotho does not have a very significant agricultural sector structure and needs to import a lot of food products, but the trade balance is partially compensated by the export of precious products such as diamonds or other goods such as men's and women's clothing.

Madagascar is another interesting case: its exports include some peculiar agricultural products, such as vanilla and cloves, but also precious minerals such as nickel, cobalt and titanium. As for imports, there are also many food products such as rice and palm oil.

From these two cases, it can be highlighted that the demand for agricultural and food products from abroad could be compensated by valuable and sought-after goods, but their ability to negotiate higher export prices on international markets should be strengthened in order to expand food supplies and improve the nutritional conditions of their domestic communities.

Trying to summarize what emerged from the analysis of these indicators, it is possible to underline that in some countries there are signs of improvement, for example in schooling and spending on health, but the rapid increase in population, the endemic negative factors and the continuous environmental and anthropic crises reveal a picture in which it can be said that the road to the fight against hunger is still long. In particular, the lack of technological progress in agriculture, but also in other sectors, tends to keep large percentages of the population below the poverty line, so that the possibility of accessing basic needs remains extremely difficult. The need to further feed the international circuits of solidarity, not so much in counterbalancing emergencies, as has mostly been done so far, but aimed primarily at strengthening the socio-economic fabric of the hungriest countries.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this article, the basic idea was to highlight the profound gaps in access to food and in ensuring sufficient and quality nutrition for all the world's peoples, with a view to intragenerational and intergenerational sustainability.

Through the Global Hunger Index, a number of countries were selected whose situations are currently profoundly negative, compromising their development.

To summarise, there are endogenous structural conditions and long-term trends that can only be overturned through patient resource planning and qualification of the resident population.

The low fertility of many areas, due to climatic factors or peculiar soil conditions (from desert to forest) prevent sufficient production for an often vastly increasing population.

Furthermore, the failure to strengthen in the educational, health and social systems often does not allow for an effective improvement in the living conditions of local communities.

On the other hand, the lack of evolution in basic services is conditioned by economic systems that are still marked by subsistence agriculture and colonial development models, in which the mining and industrial sectors are mostly geared to foreign trade and dominated by multinationals, without bringing real wealth to the local population.

In addition, the emergence of "land grabbing" (the purchase or long-term lease of vast tracts of land from mostly poor, developing countries by wealthier, food-insecure nations as well as private entities to produce food for export) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has raised deep concern over food security and rural agricultural development (Daniel, 2011). This phenomenon has been able to develop thanks to the economic power of global multinationals and the weakness of local governments. This has undermined the traditional view of land as a state-owned common good present in many states, especially in Africa, in an attempt to enter a modernisation perspective that contemplates small private property. Transfer of land rights to rural smallholders and communities would make it possible to develop rural production and livelihoods from below, using and building on existing institutions to adapt to internal and external pressures and opportunities (Havnevik, 2011).

The combination of environmental, socio-demographic and economic conditions has so far generated a downward spiral of underdevelopment that does not allow a complete evolution of these countries.

In recent years, as shown by the trend of the indicators chosen to assess the evolution of the countries with the greatest hunger problems, health and education conditions seem to be improving in many territories, also thanks to international cooperation, but it is still not possible to guarantee adequate nutrition for local communities.

Moreover, in recent years, global and regional economic events have further negatively influenced the evolutionary transition of the countries observed.

At the local level, the impact of climate change has coincided with droughts and, conversely, flooding, generating poor harvests and even more precarious living conditions, to which governments, due to a lack of resources and initiative, are unable to respond in a timely manner.

In addition, many of these countries still have a weak sense of national unity, often generating tensions and civil conflicts on an ethnic basis, to the point of completely disrupting socio-economic systems, tearing apart the fabric of social interrelationships that should underpin the building of a national feeling.

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a sharp rise in the number of people affected by global hunger and food insecurity, numbers remaining at high levels even after the end of the pandemic emergency. In 2023, about 733 million people faced hunger, and 2.33 billion people experienced moderate to severe food insecurity according to The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024.

The international outbreaks of war, in particular the Russian-Ukrainian one, have also generated two important effects: the contraction of the international circulation of certain types of agricultural and food products, in particular cereals, and the consequent substantially unstoppable rise in food prices (in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic)

The solution should therefore be a greater effort of international cooperation in providing knowledge, know-how and technology to help local populations to free themselves from the problem of daily food supply.

But, despite the efforts of international organisations such as the FAO on structural policy initiatives and the World Food Programme on food emergencies, the results can still be said to be modest in eradicating endemic hunger.

To foster balanced development goals and intragenerational and intergenerational sustainability on the global scale with regard to access to food, global cooperation mechanisms probably need to be rethought.

Food has become a powerful mechanism of geopolitical control, a soft power in which the hungry depend on rich countries that can influence the choices of entire communities according to the will of the hand that feeds them.

Even apparently solidaristic policies of knowledge circulation and dissemination of know-how and technological equipment often conceal unequal exchange logics. Therefore, it is not surprising that even today the role of NGOs is fundamental in these territories, to make up for international cooperation, which otherwise is often not sincerely interested in the good of the peoples, but in conditioning them.

It is therefore necessary to rethink profoundly the system of international cooperation and the role of the United Nations, which is incapable of building a lasting international peace after the end of the era of global bipolarism, called for by former UN Secretary Boutros-Ghali (Boutros-Ghali, 1992).

Today's liquid society was supposed to erase barriers and borders between nations in the light of rampant globalisation and the widespread use of ICTs, but strangely it has brought back to the forefront the concepts of borders, ethnic and religious distinctions.

The issue of food is, therefore, seen from this perspective not as a problem of humanity, i.e. with a solidaristic outlook, but with indifference, paternalism or even as a means of controlling peoples.

International cooperation must build new and robust solidarity networks with public and private actors, bringing humankind and its basic needs to the centre. Perhaps this reasoning could be considered utopian, but the spiral of underdevelopment perpetuated in the global distribution of food can only be countered by a decisive international awareness, bearing in mind that there is only one planet and that the suffering of each person indirectly reflects on all the others.

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